

A woman with blonde hair styled in an updo, wearing a bright yellow, off-the-shoulder, floor-length gown. She is seen from the back, looking over her right shoulder towards the camera. The background is a warm, golden-brown, slightly blurred interior space with a chandelier visible in the distance.

Misadventures
OF THE
Heart

A *Gentleman's*
GUIDE TO
SAVE A *Lady*

TANYA
WILDE

A Gentleman's Guide to Save a Lady

Tanya Wilde

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Tanya Wilde
authortanyawilde@gmail.com
www.authortanyawilde.com

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Chapter 1

It was a confirmed fact that when a lady did not court trouble, trouble had a way of courting a lady. At least that was the case for Lady Belle Middleton.

And now that her two best friends, Lady Josephine and Lady Evelyn, were blissfully married—and she remained gloriously unattached—things were just as they should be. For this precise reason, Lady Belle believed quite earnestly that trouble would soon come barreling her way—and not the good kind, she reflected dubiously.

The realization hit her the moment her foot hovered over the threshold of Lord and Lady Chesterton's annual masked ball. She could not say where the awareness came from, but the force of it was enough to halt her step and make her consider heading for the nearest carriage instead. But Lady Belle was nothing if not brave. And curious.

Her interest sparked.

Always too inquisitive for her own good, especially as a child, she'd always driven her brothers mad. Countless times they had been forced to chase her when she decided to inspect unknown places on their country estate. Not even the servant's quarters had been off limits.

And it was that same curiosity that prompted her to proceed through the front entrance into whatever trouble awaited her on this particular night. Because who is to say that trouble had *her* in its sight? What exactly was this trouble? Would it be good or bad trouble? Her ever-curious mind could not resist the call that beckoned her to find out.

Boisterous laughter and simpering whimpers reached her as she entered the ballroom. Nothing appeared to be out of the ordinary. In fact, by all accounts, it promised to be quite a marvelous evening.

Dancers twirled, enjoying the music, while other ladies and gentlemen flirted outrageously with one another on the sidelines, believing they were safe under the guise of their masks.

Out of habit, Belle felt for her own weapon of concealment, making certain her mask was in place as she waded through the throng of peers.

She spotted a few of Madam De La Frey's scandalous gowns amongst the crowd, successfully exposing their wearer's ample charms. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. Her own gown was of an equally improper design and exposed much of her skin. Midnight blue silk clung to her corset in a wickedly sensational manner. The material of her mask matched the dark hue of her gown, the intricate silver pattern bringing out the vivid blue of her eyes. Her blond hair was pinned loosely to the side of her head, setting her apart from the rest of the ladies in attendance. She did not fancy the proper styled-to-perfection look that most ladies preferred.

She did, however, delight in evenings such as these where intrigue was almost a certainty and enticing flirtations were as rampant as the smiles of gentlemen. Of course, the evening was only improved by the fact that everything was accompanied with a dash of inappropriate behavior. It was, after all, why any hostess would host such an event.

She smiled coyly at a young lord as she passed him, letting her gaze travel over his horrendous orange jacket in interest before she winked at him.

At the same time, and with no warning whatsoever, unease rippled from the root of her head down to her delicate toes.

She stilled.

At first, her trepidation appeared to be nothing more than the tightening of muscles, but all at once her breath quickened and her heart started to hammer in her chest. Her body's reaction to the unseen force should have warned her of the impending distress, but Belle was wholly unprepared for the apprehension that hit her like a reticule filled with stones.

Quite bothersome, the sensation. For she could no more put a finger to its origin than she could place a finger on air. What could it possibly be? The trouble she'd sensed earlier? Unless, perhaps, she was coming down with some sort of ailment?

And just like that, the intrigue of the evening withered to nothing but an uncomfortable turn around the room. In light of this disturbing change, Belle decided to glide over to the nearest potted plant to lurk there until the feeling passed. The plant turned out to be not so near after all. She cared little, hoping to escape the hold of whatever caused her sudden apprehension.

A breath of relief parted from her lips when she finally reached her

destination. From her vantage point beside the fern, she had a view of most of the ballroom and could signal for Evelyn and Josephine once they sauntered into view.

Another shiver of awareness caused more uneasiness to tingle down her spine. Her leg twitched and she shifted in an attempt to rid herself of the continued feeling. It felt as if someone was watching her.

"What silliness," she muttered.

It was a masked ball after all. Everyone would be watching everyone, trying to determine their identities. But still, instinct warned her to remain vigilant.

And that was when it truly hit her.

The impact of her recognition forced the breath from her lungs and a dull roaring filled her mind. If not for one tiny thing, she may have attributed the burning sensation of being watched to the fact that it was a masked ball. She may have shaken off the apprehension.

She might have, if not for that smell.

A woody fragrance of earth and musk combined with a dash of sweetness wafted up to her nose, gently disturbing the air around her. While she hadn't noticed the smell before now, her body had recognized it the moment she advanced over the threshold. Her senses had warned her of some impending danger, but, as she so often did, she'd ignored the warning.

And even though the fragrance was common enough, it was the sweetness mixed with the spiciness that she'd only inhaled once before. More to the point, she had only ever smelled on one man in particular.

Bile rose in the back of her throat.

He'd returned.

"No," she whispered meekly, her eyes darting between the men in her near vicinity.

But Belle knew better and did not bother to continue to search for him in the crowd. He'd be wearing a mask, rendering him invisible to her eye—if he did not wish for his presence to be known, it would not be. So instead, she took a step closer to the fern.

A sudden thought occurred to her. What if he knew who she was, even with her mask?

No.

No, that could not be.

He believed her to be dead.

The implication of what it meant for her if he had indeed returned was too horrid to contemplate. If he discovered that she was still hearty and very much alive, he'd hunt her down and...*crush her.*

Belle clutched a hand over her midriff, where the long ragged scar marred her flesh. Sweat formed across her brows. The only thing

keeping her from shattering was the knowledge that she was nothing like she'd been four years ago. If he was indeed searching for her, he would be searching for a weak, awkward and easily-deceived nitwit. She wasn't that nitwit any longer.

Hovering by death's door had changed her. In those painful moments when she'd believed she was to die, she'd known all she wished to be and everything she'd desired to accomplish, and she'd known it all would perish with her.

It had been unacceptable.

And in her refusal to die with so much undone, she survived. She'd since become stronger, less ignorant and more resolute. Perhaps she was mistaken, perhaps *he* did not darken these halls as she suspected.

Still, the panic edged its way up her spine.

Before it could burst through her, dampen her skin or God forbid, compress her lungs, she took a few deep breaths to tamp down her alarm. When she turned back to the crowd, she spotted Evelyn's brother, the Earl of Westfield, enter the room.

Relief made her knees wobble. The frantic beat of her heart sped up even more—not because of some fanciful notion that her heart raced to match the steady beat of his and *not* because Belle held some minor, misguided affection for him. Oh no, none of that. It was only because Westfield represented a beacon of safety.

He'd been her constant shadow for months on end due to his misguided notion to protect her from...well, whatever he thought she required protection from. With him in attendance, she was as safe as safe can be.

And there was no mistaking that it was him. He stood tall, taller than most, with his blond hair styled to its usual perfection. A handsome face with strong features hid behind his plain black mask. But it was his expressive eyes that affected one most—they were the kind of eyes that at a glance could hold you spellbound or turn you into a puddle.

Yet, he also wore his heart in his eyes. It was why Belle had imagined him a total bore when she first met him. No mystery. And for Belle, it was mysterious, evasive men that held all the appeal. How else was a lady supposed to spend her time other than with a bit of intrigue? Who didn't love peeling away the layers of hidden treasures?

Westfield, however, did not deserve such an obvious display of flirtation. She could just imagine him dropping to one knee at the bat of an eyelash—he was that much of a gentleman. Except, it seemed, when it came to her. It appeared that he reserved all his scowls for her.

Belle considered him from a distance, her earlier distress nearly forgotten. His black eyes raked over passing gentlemen and ladies

alike as he waded through the throng of people, immediately dismissing anyone that held no appeal. The ladies darted him hopeful glances and waved their colorful fans in an attempt to gain his attention, but he appeared oblivious to their ministrations.

Even so, his always-ready smile sat plastered on his face. He was just so dratted happy all the time. Often, it grated on Belle's nerves, and by "often," she meant more often than not.

It gave her immense pleasure to know that she, at least, possessed the means to ignite his temper. Though specifically why his laughing eyes always seemed to shoot daggers her way, she did not understand.

Lost in thought, she had little warning her privacy was about to be disturbed until a big shadow fell over her.

"It would not surprise me if your names are engraved on every damn potted plant in England."

Belle's surprised gaze flew to that of James Shaw, who came up beside her. She craned her neck to catch the slight display of amusement on his lips. He did not bother to glance down at her but continued to watch the crowd. Alas, he was correct. If notorious plant lurkers were ever identified in such a way, there was little doubt that it would be she, Josephine and Evelyn who received the honor.

"What an utterly ridiculous thought, Mr. Shaw, but how lovely of you to join my potted plant watch-keeping."

He snorted before murmuring, "You looked troubled, Lady Belle."

Was that his way of explaining his presence here with her? She shrugged. "I am wearing a mask. How would you know what I look like?" she pointed out.

"Perhaps you are not aware that I've made it my utmost goal to decipher the workings of the female mind, especially of those who lurk beside plants."

"And what have you discovered?"

"I've only ever found trouble brewing, which is exactly why I'm here."

"Just as well, you would never do as a plant lurker."

James's boisterous howl caused Belle's lips stretched into a smile. His laughter was contagious. A mountain of a man, plants would lurk behind him and not the other way around—if plants could lurk, that is. It was troubling, however, that he'd deduced something was amiss even with most of her features concealed. She'd have to do a better job at hiding her fear.

From the corner of her eye, she studied him. James and his brother, Derek, were notorious troublemakers in the ton. It was unclear why society tolerated them, but no one ever questioned their presence there. In fact, everyone just accepted them.

Belle knew the brothers through their assistance with Jo's charity

projects.

“They look happy, do they not?”

Belle followed James’s gaze to where Evelyn and Jo were dancing, enjoying a quadrille with their husbands. She barely refrained from snorting, and a soft unladylike noise escaped her.

“Ah yes, I am plagued by doting couples and doe-eyed stares.”

That did not mean she desired her dearest friends to be any less happy than they clearly were, but by the saints, couldn’t they at least limit their affections to the privacy of their homes or bedchambers?

Belle ignored James’s stare, which was burning holes in the top of her head. How odd that she sensed the exact moment when he frowned, not by stealing a glance at his face, but by the subtle shift of his body. Impossible to miss, even from the corner of her eye.

“You do not agree with me?” he asked.

“On the contrary, I’m waiting in utter fear for the inevitable match-making attempts.”

A chuckle met her statement, but he still appeared unconvinced.

“You are the last of your trio to remain unattached. Dare I ask for how long?” he hinted.

She cocked her head to the side. “I’ve yet to meet a man who can catch me.”

That earned her a loud snort. “I cannot understand why any lady would desire to remain unmarried, but I suppose I can respect it.”

Belle lifted her shoulders in a small shrug. It mattered little what James Shaw thought. At least to her.

The music ended and she waited patiently for her friends to make their way toward them, their husbands breaking away and cutting another path to Westfield, who was paused at the edge of the door opposite to where she stood.

As if sensing that someone watched him, his gaze shot up and locked with hers from across the room. Belle’s cheeks warmed on contact and she quickly angled her face away, though she snuck another peak his way again from the corner of her eye. His gaze had settled on James, the lines on his forehead the only indication of his narrowed regard.

Belle shifted closer to James. Because it had to be done. It must never become known that one look from Westfield possessed the power to reduce her insides to rubble. To her relief, Evelyn and Jo appeared before her, effectively cutting Westfield from her line of sight.

“You should be dancing, Belle!” Evelyn exclaimed in excitement before glancing up at James. “Mr. Shaw, what a pleasure to see you attend such a romantic gathering.”

“With so many *unattached* young misses,” Jo put in with a wink.

Belle groaned.

"I am merely here to seek out your treasured company, Lady Jo."

Her friend harrumphed. "You are such a scoundrel, James, and lucky my husband tolerates you."

"I play to my strengths, Lady Jo, and St. Aldwyn is lucky to still have his ass attached to his—"

"Let us not get carried away," Evelyn interrupted with a meaningful look their way.

"No, let's," Jo disagreed.

"You wound me, my lady," James said with a smirk. "Alas, I am merely the messenger. My brother has called for a meeting to discuss an impending project."

Apprehension returned to the in the pit of Belle's stomach, but she remained silent, watching her friends with growing dread.

"Why not inform my husband of this meeting? You know how he overreacts," Jo murmured, the sparkle in her eyes brightening.

James shrugged, his eyes flicking in the direction of the men. "I should have, but chose not to."

"Oh, James, how terrible you are!" Evelyn admonished.

It seemed a never-ending source of entertainment for James to vex the Marquis of St. Aldwyn and the Earl of Grey, Jo's and Evelyn's husbands, respectively. But Belle hardly heard their bantering. The timing of the meeting and her premonition of danger felt all too coincidental for her taste. An urgent gathering meant a risky project lay ahead.

"Belle? Are you all right?" Evelyn asked, her voice laced with concern.

"I am fine," Belle murmured to her friend. "It's just stuffy in here."

"The event is quite the crush," Jo agreed.

"Your knights in armor are glaring my way. I imagine they blame me for your pale disposition," James murmured with a wink.

Belle shot him a glare. Her disposition was not weak.

"They are not fond of you, James, but you already knew that," Evelyn replied.

James chuckled. "I am aware, Lady Evelyn. Their upset is just an additional boon of conversing with you three beautiful ladies."

"You are incorrigible!" Jo exclaimed with laughter.

Belle's gaze flicked to the men gathered across the room.

Unable to help herself, she glanced at Westfield. He was indeed glaring at James along with the other two men, all of their gazes sharp. At least, one could only assume they glared by the thin lines of their lips and the hard locking of their jaws. In any case, their distaste was clear.

This distaste greatly disturbed Belle. If they harbored so much

discontent for the brothers and their ventures, how did that bode for her should they ever discover what she had done four years ago? The brothers, however unconventional in their ways, helped save people. What she'd done...it skirted more in the way of shameful, unspeakable, *unpardonable*.

Perhaps she was being overly dramatic. If her tormentor had returned, it might not even be for her. He wasn't meant to know she even lived. But even so, he still had to be dealt with if he had indeed returned—whether it was for her or not. But how could she go about dealing with the man that left her for dead?

Still observing Westfield, Belle realized that the obvious animosity he, St. Aldwyn and Grey were directing at James Shaw had begun to cause some eyes to wander their way.

"Your husbands are going to cause a scandal if they keep glaring this way," Belle murmured.

"Oh, don't be silly! Only speculation would arise from their broodiness, not scandal."

"Speculation, right. And what will others assume to be the cause of their broodiness, I wonder? Certainly not that Mr. Shaw and I are both unattached."

James choked on air.

Her friends only chuckled merrily.

Belle narrowed her eyes on them. Of course, it would have crossed their minds. They wished for her to be *blissfully* married, as well. She rolled her eyes heavenward at their obvious attempt at matchmaking. "Well, I for one would like to avoid such speculation, wouldn't you agree, Mr. Shaw?"

"I do, Lady Belle."

A smile tugged at her lips at the man's obvious discomfort. To her friends, she only raised a brow.

"Oh bother! You are no fun!" Evelyn groused.

"I am plenty fun, but I also prefer plenty of discretion in any mayhem I cause."

And Belle did enjoy stirring up the masses, mostly by designing scandalous gowns under the guise of Madam De La Frey.

"So James," Jo began, "when is our assignation to take place?"

Belle choked back a laugh.

James shook his head. "Please refrain from using that particular word for our meeting in the company of your husband. I will send the details over tomorrow."

"Then why did you seek us out tonight if you're not to inform us of those details now?" Evelyn asked.

"To vex your husbands, would be my guess," Belle offered.

The smile coating James's face confirmed her guess to be correct.

“You truly are a beast,” Evelyn said, her eyes dancing.

For a brief moment, Belle felt her spirits rise. In the presence of her friends, it was hard not to forget her earlier panic. That was until the smell of spice and sweetness tickled her nose again.

Her heart sank and she involuntarily glanced around. There was no one near her so her gaze darted to the open French doors. Could it be that a slight breeze had carried in the fragrance?

Ill at ease, she returned her attention back to her friends.

Their eyes sparkled as they laughed at something James said. Would the laughter still be in their eyes if they ever learned the truth of her past?

She prayed she'd never have to find out that answer.

Chapter 2

The following day, Belle was seated across from her friends in the drawing room of Jo's new home, which she shared with her husband, the Marquis of St. Aldwyn, wondering how it came to pass that one night had completely rendered her otherwise fabulous life, less fabulous.

Or perhaps it was all the wrought iron candle holders scattered across the room, equipped with black candles set against deep red velvet drapes. Had the walls not been covered in red as well, even with the intricate gold design, Belle may have thought differently on the matter.

Too much red.

Lavender. Yes, Lavender would do nicely in this room.

Her gaze circled back to her friends. She watched them over the rim of her cup as they whispered in hushed tones, a clue that they were conspiring. It was a pleasant distraction, even if she wasn't certain she'd like whatever they were up to.

Last night still weighed heavily on her mind. She knew it might just be her imagination—last night marked the fifth anniversary of that fateful night, after all—but a nasty foreboding still plagued her. Even if she had imagined the scent, the shivers and the suspicion, it did not change the fact that the heart-wrenching and dangerous secret she kept hidden always hung over her like a stormy cloud.

Utterly depressing, that.

It was, of course, made worse by the fact she could not share the burden with anyone. She loved her friends too dearly to subject them to a secret that could destroy them.

When Belle first met Evelyn and Josephine, they bonded over their mutual agreement that married life did not suit them, each having

their own unique reason for their lack of interest in the institution.

But all that changed when Evelyn's brother hatched a scheme to introduce the brooding Earl of Grey back into society. The scheme set a sequence of events in motion that no one could have predicted—events that resulted in Evelyn's and later Jo's marriage. Of course, Belle was happy for her friends, but she remained disinclined to trot down the aisle. Her aversion, however, did not seem to register with them—or perhaps it simply didn't bother them. No doubt they already picked out a husband for her and, in their minds, simply needed to nudge her.

Usually, she would indulge her friends their ministrations even if she knew they would lead nowhere, but today her reflections were much too maudlin to allow her to entertain their antics. Perhaps if she had rested, she'd have another perspective, but her sleep had been plagued by nightmares. Eventually, Belle had given up on sleep altogether and spent the remainder of the night sketching a new line of gowns, all the while silently cursing her brothers for abandoning her to her fate.

Her brothers had left England soon after their parents perished on a ship bound for France. They had wished to travel and explore the world, as, apparently, their parent's demise had prompted life-altering questions for them. Of course, Belle did not begrudge them their adventures, and she supposed everyone dealt with grief their own way, she just never imagined they would leave her behind with her decrepit aunt.

“So we wondered whether you'd consider—”

“No,” Belle interrupted before Jo had a chance to finish her sentence. Best to nip this scheming in the bud. “You may be marvelously happy in your marriages, but my reasons for remaining unwed have not changed.”

Evelyn and Jo glanced at each other.

Belle calmly took a sip of her tea even though Jo's smile was sly. Like a cat. “We would never bully you into something you did not wish to do, Belle. We just thought perhaps you would enjoy some other aspects of entering a relationship with a man.”

Belle choked on her tea then.

Surely they were not suggesting she embark on an affair? But then again, why wouldn't they? Had she not always acted like an outrageous flirt? Most of the time she only pretended to be so daring, though she supposed that her friends would not know that she was only pretending for a bit of fun, for a distraction. She'd gotten quite good at pretending to be someone she was not. Perhaps even to the extent that she'd actually become the person she feigned to be. So no, she could not blame them the assumption.

"I do not imagine that to be wise."

"Why ever not?" Jo asked.

"Look at where it got us," Evelyn added dreamily.

"Exactly," Belle said with a raise of her brows.

"Well, you do not have to marry the man," Jo said with a smile.

"Every woman should experience the body of a male at least once."

Belle groaned. They would have her ravaged for nothing but a grand experience.

Evelyn nodded her agreement. "Does the famous Madam De La Frey not deserve some excitement?"

Excitement?

Ruinination seemed the most appropriate word. That is why she'd donned the persona of Madam De La Frey in the first place, to avoid the pesky bother of ruinination. So what if she designed flimsy gowns that scandalized old dames? Did that mean she must act the part of a scandalized woman, too? No. No, it did not.

"My identity is not widely known, I'd like for it to stay that way. Family name and all."

She'd rather not be the one that sent her aunt to an early grave.

"You can still keep your activities a secret," Jo put in.

"It would be quite bothersome to keep my secret a secret if I embarked on a wild affair, which in itself would only add to the pile of secrets."

"I do not see how," Evelyn replied in a thoughtful manner. "You need only to set aside a few hours for the affair. It needn't come between you and any of your other activities."

Belle shook her head. The topic of their conversation burned her ears. Her friends were relentless, and she'd admit that they argued good points. But while they had found a compromise in their marriages, Belle would never be able to.

She took another sip of her tea, wishing it were something stronger. "I will not be swayed from my decision to remain unattached, not even for some tawdry affair." At their sullen expressions, Belle added, "But I shall consider the merits of your argument, though I make no promises."

"Your consideration is all we can hope for," Evelyn appeased.

Hah! Belle narrowed her eyes on her friends. They would not stop their pestering on this front—she was sure of it. But she was equally sure of her abilities to withstand any match-making attempts on their part.

But you do not truly want to withstand their attempts.

Belle cursed her inner voice. It was yet another secret she held close to her heart—closer even than the other. She'd always wanted to marry, to be part of a family. Yet, it was the one thing she knew she'd

never do.

“Yes, well, my time is better spent on the exquisite gowns I am designing for us,” Belle finally replied, hoping to end that particularly thread of their conversation. As soon as the words left her lips, however, St. Aldwyn and Westfield sauntered into the room.

Against her will, Belle’s breath caught in her throat at the sight of Westfield.

Drat. Why did he have to be so blasted handsome?

As always, not one hair on his blonde head stood out of place. He was leaner than St. Aldwyn, though they stood at the same height. His broad shoulders were slightly less pronounced, and where St. Aldwyn appeared hard around the edges, Westfield was striking. He wore his standard easy smile, one that brightened at the sight of his sister, Evelyn. A twinge of envy pinched her heart at the obvious display of affection between the siblings.

“What are you ladies up to?” St. Aldwyn asked with a broad smile, his eyes never leaving his wife. “Not plotting my demise, I hope?”

“Now why would we plot your demise, husband?” Jo asked, her voice syrupy sweet.

“Because I’ll pummel any man who dares flirt with my wife and she does not approve of my violence?”

Jo only laughed merrily. “Is this your attempt to discover the reason for James’s presence at the masked ball?”

“Perhaps the giant did not take note that you are spoken for?” There was an edge to his voice even though his smile remained in place.

Belle nearly snorted at the obvious display of male possessiveness. Had it not occurred to the men that perhaps James might be courting her? The idea annoyed Belle.

“I’m not spoken for,” she replied in a soft tone, her smile taking on a wicked edge.

St. Aldwyn’s hard eyes locked onto her.

Belle blinked innocently. It was clear he did not like the idea of Shaw being around his wife often—something that would happen if Shaw were indeed courting her. “You will recall I was in conversation with Mr. Shaw before your wife arrived,” she added in way of further explanation.

Out of the corner of her eye, Westfield stiffened.

“I was not aware you had decided to join the marriage mart,” Westfield muttered after a long pause.

Belle shrugged in response. “I haven’t.”

Her friends cackled at the matching looks of utter confusion that graced the men’s faces before understanding dawned on them. Their eyes widened the moment it did.

“Belle!” Evelyn exclaimed. “You will give them heart failure with

your wicked sense of humor!"

Belle waved Evelyn's comment aside. "Is it not astounding how men can be so easily shocked by the words of a lady?"

"Ladies should not speak such shocking words," Westfield snapped, the easy charm of his smile gone.

"And men should not rule the world, yet here we are," Belle countered.

"Oh? And I suppose you think a woman could take over that mantle?"

Jo cleared her throat before Belle could reply. "I doubt the world is ruled by either man or woman but rather by mankind, although men do have a distinct advantage as they are given certain liberties."

"Well, since I am a self-proclaimed spinster, I daresay those advantages and liberties befall me, as well," Belle responded.

Westfield's agitated tone snapped through the air. "Has this self-proclaimed spinsterhood made you less of a lady, then?"

"Of course not."

"Then you are not at liberty to have liberties."

Belle wanted to kick Westfield for his boorish ways. How could a man so cheerful and affable so quickly become austere and stuffy? It defied explanation.

She shot him a heated glare. "Well, as that is your opinion, it is a good thing that my life is no concern of yours."

"You are Evelyn's friend and your actions reflect back on her, so it is my concern."

"That is just ridiculous! Evelyn is not even your concern now, is she? Being Grey's wife and all," Belle pointed out. "What a bore you are, Westfield. And *ladies* do not like bores."

"By your own account, you are no longer intending to behave as a true lady ought, so I do not care what you think I am."

Belle gasped.

The rotten beast!

"Simon!" Evelyn chastised. "You forget your manners! That is my friend you are being rude to."

Westfield's cheeks warmed under his sister's stern regard. It was the first time Belle had heard Evelyn take such a stern voice with her brother.

"My apologies, Lady Belle," he muttered almost too low for her to hear.

Belle snorted.

"Perhaps you should entertain your guest in the study, my dear?" Josephine suggested to her husband who nodded in assent.

Belle felt the sting of Westfield's dark gaze on her as he departed, but she refused to look his way. Why she had ever thought him a

delicious specimen was beyond her. Best to stay away from him altogether.

Hopefully, he'd do the same.

Simon was fuming by the time he stalked into St. Aldwyn's wood-paneled study. He could not remember a time when a woman so completely vexed him to the point of blind fury.

Boorish? He most certainly was not a bore. And who the hell was she to say otherwise? Granted, he possessed certain views, like that a lady should be sheltered and cared for, for one, but that hardly constituted that he had boorish tendencies.

Never had he been anything but a gentleman.

Lady Belle's implication that she and James Shaw may not have marriage on their minds in their flirtation was outlandish and preposterous. And it had set his blood to boil.

She was outspoken, often dressed as no lady ought to and a brazen flirt. In fact, she was plain trouble—trouble with a dash of exquisite beauty—which was not the sort of woman he favored at all.

Hell, what insanity was this? He was a grown man and he was moping about his friend's study all because she had called him a bore. He began listing her myriad of flaws in an attempt to soothe his anger. Impetuous, yes, she was certainly that, reckless, bold, completely disrespectful of a gentleman's station...and still the most fascinating being he had ever set eyes on. The last was certainly her largest flaw.

Dammit.

"That woman will drive me to madness, yet."

"I take that to mean that you are not aware you are already being plagued with madness."

Simon shot his friend a glare. St. Aldwyn only lifted an inquiring brow before continuing. "In my experience, a woman does not drive a man to madness unless she has him hooked to an unseen chain. Are you perhaps hooked?"

"Absolutely not," he declared with a strong voice, but his brows were already creasing at the edges. "Well...I do not know...perhaps."

St. Aldwyn chuckled, handing Simon a brandy. "It seems to me that Lady Belle has got your knickers in a twist."

"Did your wife mention if Lady Belle's interest swung at all in my direction?"

"No, but if she was clearly inclined, I do not think you would be tied up in knots over her barbs, wouldn't you say?"

"I don't know what has possessed me, but it appears more trouble than it's worth. No matter how beautiful she may be."

"Men have started wars over a beautiful woman. I would say beauty is reason enough."

“Is that why you married your wife?” Simon asked skeptically before taking a swallow of brandy, the golden liquid burning his throat.

“I married my wife because she insisted we not live in sin.”

Simon laughed at that. “Does she know that?”

St. Aldwyn’s answering smile resembled that of a predator.

Simon suffered no doubts that his friend was madly in love with his wife, though his public denial of this fact provided an unlimited source of entertainment.

“In any case, Westfield, do not question a beautiful woman with questionable pursuits. They may appear to not be worth the trouble at first, but I guarantee they certainly are.”

Simon managed to refrain from rolling his eyes. “Shaw has requested a meeting. What do you imagine it is about?”

St. Aldwyn rubbed his jaw, which was already covered in a day’s worth of stubble. “Since they require all of us to be present, I can only assume misfortune.”

“And you will allow this?”

His friend lifted his shoulders in a shrug. “I’m quite fond of my wife’s wild ways. To forbid her to continue her charities would be to extinguish the flickering light that guides my path.”

“Hell’s bells. You *have* gone off the deep end, my friend.”

“If I have, I am not alone.”

“Should I join you?”

“So long as you do not crawl into my bed, you are most welcome.”

Simon snorted as he attempted to settle into a comfortable position on a chair, but his entire body was stiff with tension. What his predicament called for was the ample charms of a woman. Yet disturbingly enough, it had been months since any woman caught his fancy. Even his usual widow had not been able to entice him to her bed.

Bloody hell. What the devil was wrong with him?

With an audible sigh, he muttered, “I can’t even summon interest for my usual amorous haunts.”

St. Aldwyn lips stretched into a knowing grin. “Ah yes, the bittersweet torment has begun. The same happened to me when I failed to rid Josephine from my mind. You, my friend, will only want one lady until you’ve purged her from your system. Until then, no other will do.”

“You’re still purging your system, I take it?” Simon asked with another swig of his tumbler.

“Every damn day.”

Simon thought as much.

But slating his desires would ruin the lady in question. Unless...

Unless he married her.

The thought was so sudden and so clear he actually blinked.

Did he wish to marry her?

It seemed impossible to say. So he began to reflect on what he did know. First, he knew that he wanted what his friends had: a family of his own. Secondly, he was obsessed with a certain blond, blue-eyed vixen. And thirdly, and most importantly, he wanted to taste the sweetness of that vixen's lips. There was only one problem...

"She believes me a bore."

"So prove her otherwise."

Easier said than done.

He supposed a kiss might prove just how passionate he was by nature. That should change her ridiculous belief that he was boorish.

But what happened after he proved her wrong? And what of her flirtatious reputation and her untamed ways? To contemplate a courtship when he'd be unable to tolerate her batting her eyelashes at every gentleman would be well...intolerable.

As if sensing his inner conflicted, St. Aldwyn spoke. "Have you considered that Lady Belle's wild nature may be the reason why she is so alluring? Without it, she'd just be another miss."

That brought Simon up short. He hadn't considered that. He'd only known that there was something profound about her, something that spoke to him in a way he did not quite understand. He'd never been so drawn to a woman before, which was both terrifying and exciting at the same time.

"I suppose it's worth looking into."

St. Aldwyn grunted. "I would caution to be a bit more careful of that chit, though. She's not like your sister or my wife—tougher than nails, that one. I doubt the accustomed flowers-and-poems courtship will sway her to your side."

Oh, his friend needn't warn him on that account.

"What do you suggest, then?"

"Stalk her obsessively. Eventually, she will tire of your face and just marry you."

Simon shot him a dark look. "Sometimes I wonder how you managed to secure your wife."

"I have the face of an angel."

"And the character of a devil."

St. Aldwyn chuckled.

"In any case, marriage seems hardly the answer." Simon paused for a brief moment. "Did she seem out of sorts to you? Earlier?"

His friend shrugged. "She looked like she always looks, I suppose."

Simon nodded. However, he was not convinced. Something had changed, and recently, too. It caused a certain haunted look to lurk in

her eyes. An inherent sadness he'd never noticed before was suddenly apparent in her countenance.

In the back of his mind, he knew this obsession could only lead to impropriety, but he was determined to unearth every single layer of the woman. Even if it meant stripping her of every secret she possessed, he'd do anything to understand the magnetism of his attraction to her.

Chapter 3

Dear sister,

I hope this letter finds you in good health.

We are sailing across the Mediterranean and it is a beautiful sight to behold. I wish you were able to glimpse this sea. It is the clearest blue...

Belle tossed the cursed letter aside for the thousandth time.

Good health? She hadn't seen her brothers in years. They could damn well come see her health with their own eyes if they wanted to know it. Though she possessed half a mind to scratch those very eyes out if they did. Unfortunately, she still loved those wretched men too dearly.

This letter, which she'd read countless of times in the past, represented the only time she'd been truly envious of her brothers, the only time she'd felt cheated. Fine, perhaps not the *only* time, but if her brother had truly wanted her to see the clearest blue water in existence, he should have taken her along and not abandoned her to her aunt.

Five years, three months and twenty-eight days: the precise amount of time since she'd last glimpsed her brothers' faces.

Three months, thirteen and a half days: the amount of time since she'd last received a letter from either of them.

To the devil with the rotters.

It was their desertion had allowed her grief-stricken heart to engage with an evil man. And the cost of her ill-fated journey was too painful to contemplate. She oftentimes wondered whether it would have unraveled the same way if her brothers had remained in England. It certainly would have been avoided had they taken her along. She recalled her anger at their refusal, but they'd held firm, arguing that Aunt Bertha needed her.

So she'd been all alone with her grief, a prelude to the darkest days of her life. And they weren't even aware of any of it.

True, fate had dealt her a painful hand, but then, as if in apology for its cruelty, fate had also sent two precious sister-souls across her path. So she chose not to dwell on the dark days, but on the spark of light that had entered her life when she met Evelyn and Josephine.

They'd given her the strength to claw her way from the deep abyss, sewing together the tattered remains of her conscience and burying the guilt under the guise of a new self. Which had worked just fine until now.

"Oh, Charlemagne, what am I to do?" she murmured as her large white greyhound trotted over to her side at the breakfast table. He nuzzled her hand as if sensing her distress, though his eyes remained locked on her buttered toast. "Oh, very well, you can have the toast, Char, I've lost my appetite anyhow."

In one smooth motion, he snatched the toast from her fingers and settled down by her feet.

At least at four and twenty she'd learned to trust her own instincts and when to ignore them in favor of some fun adventure. Now, though, she knew she must prepare herself for the worst.

The certainty of *his* return churned in her stomach.

"He is back, Char. I just know it. The only question that remains I suppose is whether he's aware I'm still alive."

The hound's head perked up at her voice before it settled back on top of her foot.

"It is also too much of a coincidence that in the realization of his arrival, a meeting is called," she muttered into her tea.

Belle shivered at the mere notion of subjecting her friends to the mistakes of her past.

Her finger tapped to her chin in thought, before jotting down a few points on a piece of paper. The time for self-pity had passed—years ago, in fact. She had no business sulking while there was so much to consider. Valuable time had already been wasted. Now, she needed to take preemptive action.

"If I'm lucky Char, Evelyn and Jo will never discover my foolishness."

To what lengths would she go to prevent them from discovering the truth? She sighed, glancing down at the dog's big round eyes, which were staring back at her. One could accomplish many things if one only put some thought into a plan.

She knew Edgar. Even now she was able to recall, with vivid clarity, the smell his rancid breath on her face as he laughed at her stupidity.

She would beat him this time. More importantly, she would put an end to him and his evil ways.

But how to capture him?
Belle patted Charlemagne's head before she sat back and regarded her scribblings.

How to put an end to Edgar:

1. *Let wild dogs loose on him.*
2. *Make him walk the plank. (Don't have a ship.)*
3. *Steal a ship and make him walk the plank.*
4. *Shoot him on the spot.*
5. *Hire a gunman to shoot him on the spot.*
6. *Poison.*
7. *Lock him away in the basement. (Forever.)*

About the only thing, she could reasonably manage on the entire list was to point a pistol at him, but, even then, she was a terrible shot. And she had no pistol.

Locking him away in the basement would be best—as long as he never escaped. But even if she managed to accomplish such a herculean task, it would require a life-long commitment. He was not worth such dedication.

To poison his food once he'd been apprehended would be much easier, but Belle did not wish to lower to such a degraded level of wretchedness if she could avoid it.

And, before any of these could be accomplished, she'd have to act as bait and entrap him, something that seemed impossible. At least on her own. It would require a cunning that she wasn't certain she possessed.

Drat it, but she was awful at plotting to catch villains.

A frantic laugh escaped her.

Was she truly plotting to murder a man? But then again, he had started it.

Oh, who was she fooling? She was probably going to die a horrible death!

No! You are strong, her inner voice cooed. *You can beat him.*

She repeated those words to herself until the beat of her heart steadied again.

Pouring over her notes and all the accompanying possibilities again, she took a deep breath. Luring him out would be easy enough. That much she could do. But she'd no means to catch him or force him to eat or drink anything she offered. He was a French spy for pity's sake! And she? She was just a fearful girl.

What an utter mess.

The only thing in her power to do was number five: to hire a person

of questionable character to complete the deed for her. Assuming she could really intend harm on another being, that plan was not without risk, however. Edgar had been a cunning man four years ago; there was no telling how devious he would be now. Much more so, she imagined. So her hired mercenary would need to be far craftier than a spy to match Edgar and not be in danger in the process.

“So this is what I am to do, Charlemagne? Hire a thug to take care of our problems?” Belle muttered down at the hound, watching as his ear twitched. “If only a kiss could turn you into a prince charming—wouldn’t that be grand? I’d be a princess and Edgar couldn’t touch me then. I imagine you’d have a mass of blond hair with an enchanting grin plastered on your handsome face.”

Belle swallowed a groan at her own description of prince charming. How added her mind must be to imagine Westfield, of all men, as a role model for it.

“There is no shortage of plans in the world, Charlemagne,” she mused to her hound, “only the shortage of time. And perhaps heroes. Aren’t there supposed to be more of them wandering about?”

Charlemagne lay as still as a statue.

Hire a thug it is.

Midnight

The street was silent as Belle made her way down a dark alleyway just off Serpentine Road, the echo of her boots hitting the cobblestones in sync with the rhythmic beat of her heart. She pulled her black cape tighter around her. There was a distinct iciness to the night, one that chilled her to the bone.

She was summoning a mercenary.

Earlier that day she’d sent word to one of her seamstresses to deliver a message to a trusted friend. Since not even Madam De La Frey’s own seamstresses knew her identity, it seemed the best approach. An hour later, she received an unsigned missive to meet at midnight at the corner of Hyde Park. An odd place indeed, since Hyde Park was within the bounds of Mayfair.

Belle halted at the edge of the street and settled back into the shadows, waiting with bated breath. She had no idea if this was a trap, but she’d come this far and refused to turn back. If she perished tonight, at least it would not be at the hands of Edgar. The thought consoled her even as the cold air stung her face. No matter what happened, she would *not* reveal her fear.

“I received word that you require my services,” a voice drawled from the shadows directly behind her.

Belle jumped forward with a yelp and doubled over as she caught

her breath. Saints' sakes!

What happened to no fear?

She straightened, tugging at her coat. "Yes. I need you to dispatch someone," she managed.

A shuffling noise came from behind her and she tamped down the temptation to turn around. She did not dare. Better not to see his face and she'd rather he not see hers.

"Dispatch?"

Her shoulders stiffened at the question in his words. So he wanted her to say the words. Annoyed now, she snapped, "Terminate, finish off, do away with, put to sleep. Choose whichever you are comfortable with."

A low, throaty chuckle reached her ears. "What did the poor wretched soul do to deserve such an end? A lover? A cruel husband? Or perhaps your lover's lover?"

Belle scoffed, her earlier fear replaced by chagrin. "Oh, I can assure you, sir, the task will be much more difficult than that. This person that I wish for you to dispatch wishes to see me dead. I mean to see him in the ground first."

"Is that so?"

Her eyes narrowed in the darkness. Was this some sort of trick? Did he mean to mock her state of affairs? How dare he sound intrigued by her misfortune? His apparent amusement did not bode well for his own well-being. Not against a spy.

Belle almost turned. "I do not take this matter lightly, sir. If you cannot do the same, it will be best if we end this conversation."

The very night seemed to wait in breathless anticipation as silence met her statement. Not even a slight rustle of leaves was detected. After a gut-wrenching pause, the man simply whispered, "Go on."

Belle closed her eyes as relief flooded her. "His name is Edgar De Roux and he is a suspected French spy," she stated flatly, hoping that would wipe the intrigue from his voice.

Again silence met statement.

"Well?"

"How does a lady such as yourself become embroiled with a spy?"

Very foolishly, Belle thought darkly. Then his damning words sank into her mind.

A lady such as yourself.

Perhaps he called all the women he met in dark corners ladies, she considered fleetingly. Yet, had he not requested to meet in Mayfair, not far from where she lived? It seems her identity was suspect.

"He is cunning, resourceful and will not be easy to find nor easy to eliminate. You should take care."

"You do not have to be concerned for me, *my lady*."

She stiffened at his use of the title. It was almost as if he was baiting her. Oh, who was she fooling? It was highly likely he knew her identity. She was operating with people way out of her league.

"My concern is not for you, sir. If you die, he does not. And that, I cannot have."

She turned around then.

The shadowed figure tilted his head at her boldness. He was short but solidly built and wore a cloak much like hers, though his face was cast in the shadow and entirely concealed from her view.

"He will come for me once he learns his previous effort on my life failed. If you cannot catch him on your own, I should be able to lure him out of his hole."

The stranger seemed to consider her suggestion but then waved her concern away. "You are not afraid to be known to me?"

"You do not strike me as a man that takes on a task without being made aware all the facts. You already knew who I was."

"Indeed," he murmured, begrudging respect in his voice.

When she only stared at his shadowed face, he continued, "I will take care of it. You have my payment?"

She handed him the parchment that was worth a thousand pounds. A small fortune. All of her savings, as it happened. But then, it was a trifling amount for her continued safety. "It's hard to imagine one can put a price on someone's life, yet, to me his life is not worth a penny."

"His life may mean the world to someone else."

Belle snorted. "His life means the death of many."

"The world is a cruel place, my lady, but I suspect you are already aware of that, even though you were born into a life of privilege. It will suit you well to remember that your life can be taken away, too, with the passing of a few coins."

Belle held back the retort on her tongue. "Well, I must thank you for the reminder."

He melted into the shadows but paused in his act of retreat. "Have you informed anyone of this meeting?"

"Of course not."

"Keep it that way. The moment I learn you told anyone, I will back off and you won't get your silver back."

"I understand," Belle bit out. "When will it be done?"

"Before the week ends."

Five days then. She hoped this man's confidence wasn't misplaced. But then again, he did make a livelihood as a mercenary. She supposed he knew what he was doing.

"You look worried. Is something amiss?"

Five days might be too long. "I had hoped it to be done with this sooner."

“By your own admission, he is a spy. If this were your normal drunkard, swaggering around and beating his wife, I would have it done by morning. But your man will have changed his name and be in hiding. It will take time to find him. But I will.”

Belle gave a curt nod. Another secret to keep, then.

“If you tell your friends, I will know and our arrangement will be done.”

She flinched. It was as if he had read her thoughts. “I understand.”

“Good.”

Then he hesitated. “I have to ask, are you certain this is what you want? This is not something you can come back from. I owe no one any loyalty.”

So if he got caught, he would rat her out.

“If he discovers I am alive, if he hasn’t already, not only is my life in danger but so are the lives of my family and friends. This man will go after all I love and he will enjoy my suffering. And I will be powerless to stop him. Only once he believes he’s broken me, will he kill me. That is not something you can come back from either.”

Her certainty rang true in her voice. The man she remembered would do all that and more. The best she could hope for if this mission failed and the truth became known was that her friends would shun her. The mere notion was too horrid to bear, but at least they would be safer that way.

“You’ve sealed his fate then.”

She watched as the cloaked man disappeared into the shadows, leaving her to stand in the cold with nothing but her own conscience.

“And mine,” she whispered into the darkness.

Chapter 4

It was a well-accepted fact, at least amongst a certain group of people within the upper echelons of society, that whenever a meeting was held by Lady Josephine, a fire would soon result. The initial spark was never intended, of course, but as plans went, there were usually enough holes for the disruptive charge to ignite.

Today, however, none other than Derek Shaw was holding a meeting. His position in society was unknown to Belle and to the group at large, but speculation ran rampant. They would never inquire directly about their suspicions to the source of their speculation, but they thought about it at length nonetheless.

To Belle, anyway, the mysteriousness of the Shaw brothers generated their appeal in the first place. If one discovered what they were truly about, she'd imagined them to be just as normal as anyone else.

At this particular meeting, however, her mind was lost in her dream of the previous night. She had stood in midst of a crowded ballroom, utterly alone. Her peers had mulled around and laughed at each other's jokes, yet no one seemed to notice her obvious distress. She had ended up suffocating, an invisible hand gripping her neck and tightening, and no one had looked her way.

She closed her eyes in order to will her thudding heart to relax.

It was just a dream.

"Lady Belle?" a low male voice asked in concern.

She would know that familiar voice anywhere.

"Belle?" the voice asked again, more concerned now.

Slowly, her awareness returned and her surroundings came into focus as she raised her lashes. She stood not in a crowded ballroom nor in her own home, but in the drawing room of the Tremaine

residence.

She turned to face the man of the house, Simon Tremaine, the Earl of Westfield. "Yes, I am here for the meeting. Am I early?"

He took a step closer, his eyes roaming over her features much too intimately for her comfort. "Are you all right? You look a bit pale."

That snapped her out of reverie. "Yes, I'm perfectly fine. I must have gotten the details of the meeting wrong."

"No, you have them right. The meeting is to be held now, just not here, but at St. Aldwyn's." He held out his arm. "Come, I will escort you," then grinning down at her, he continued, "or you can escort me."

Belle managed a small smile.

How embarrassing.

The ride to Jo's did not take all that long, but Belle was aware of Westfield's burning stare the entire way though he remained silent. No one seemed to take note that they arrived together either, which Belle thought for the best.

The recent additions to their band of three were namely the husbands, who were less inclined to find appeal in the mysterious air of the brothers. But while it was clear the men were the ones who held the reins, they were firmly bound by the leash of love—a leash that was worn proudly, even arrogantly, by the looks of it.

Belle followed Westfield into the room where everyone had already gathered.

Derek Shaw acted as if he owned the world—an authority that apparently extended to the study they were occupying even if it was not even his own residence. Belle did not know how Josephine put up with such arrogance all the time. It certainly grated on her own nerves.

Her gaze flickered to the other men.

Far too many arrogance males, Belle mused.

Derek Shaw stood; his fierce face tight with tension. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with us," he began, his eyes flicking to Jo. "We have a matter that requires urgent attention and would not ask for assistance if it was not dire."

"I am not comfortable involving my wife in your dire matters," Grey growled, interrupting the man when he would have continued.

Evelyn shot her husband a heated glare. "I am not some fragile miss that breaks at the use of the word dire."

Grey's eyes burned with unrelenting intensity. "I will not risk losing you."

Her friend's eyes softened. "It will take much more than some dire matter for you to lose me."

Grey only grunted.

Belle glanced at the St. Aldwyn, who had placed a protective hand on his wife's shoulder. "Spit it out, Shaw," he growled with impatience. It was no secret he remained uncomfortable with his wife's friendship with these men.

Derek Shaw nodded.

Belle braced herself.

"About four years ago, a French spy infiltrated our British ranks—"

Her heart plummeted. *Damn that pox-riddled fart.*

"—with the sole purpose of obtaining the names of our operatives in Paris. It had been believed that he'd successfully completed his mission—"

Not exactly.

"—yet nothing ever came of it," Derek paused, his eyes meeting everyone's gazes.

Belle met his eyes evenly, even though her heart hammered in her chest and her skin had tightened in alarm. She'd expected this, but still, it hit her hard and true. Shaw, on the other hand, might as well have been sipping tea and enjoying lemon cakes during his deadpan retelling of her past.

"I believe something went wrong at the end of his mission, something that prevented him from sharing the names on the list."

Yes, me.

Jo's perfectly arched brows creased at the inside edges. "That is all very peachy Derek, but what does that have to do with us?"

Remain calm.

"Yes, I do not see how we can be of help in the Crown's business," her husband agreed.

"I was getting to that part," Derek bit through his clenched jaw.

Jo threw her hands up in mock defeat, earning a grin from her husband.

"He has been spotted here in London not two days ago."

Belle's breath caught and the uneasy feeling formed again in the pit of her stomach. He'd returned the night of the ball, the night she got wind of his familiar fragrance. Deep in the halls of her heart, she had still held out hope she was wrong and that she'd given away her savings for no good reason at all. Now, that hope was irrefutably dashed.

"Does this man have a name?" Evelyn asked.

"Edgar De Roux."

Belle's too-wide eyes drifted down to her tightly clenched hands. Tears threatened, but she willed them away.

Westfield straightened at the name. "I've heard talk of him," he cleared his throat, "in certain circles. It is said that someone, a traitor to the crown, assisted his escape from the British shores as he could

never have made it out alive otherwise.”

A traitor to the crown.

Belle was going to be sick.

Before her, oblivious of her inner battle, Derek nodded. “That might as well be true. We believe that it was someone in our midst who aided him, though we could never confirm it as a fact.”

Grey shook his head. “How is this even a matter of public knowledge?”

This time, it was James who answered. “It’s not, though one can never prevent some gossip and speculation to form. Be as it may, we’ve been tasked to secure his whereabouts.”

“Tasked by whom?” Belle croaked.

“We are not at liberty to say,” James added.

“Yet you are at liberty to include civilians in your task?” Grey asked, his voice incredulous.

The brothers remained silent.

“If we assist you, does that mean we are spies, as well?” Evelyn asked, her eyes hopeful. Her question drew out a responding groan from Grey’s throat.

Belle almost smiled.

James flashed them a grin. “Only if that is what you wish.”

Grey cursed.

“So you want us to assist you in finding a foreign spy?” Westfield asked for clarity, before glancing at the women. “This is hardly a matter for ladies.”

Jo and Evelyn stiffened. Belle remained quiet. Unbeknown to them, she’d already taken matters into her own hands.

“I’ll have you know,” Jo put in snippily, “that no one knows the back alleys of this city better than I.” Jo’s eyes flickered over to her. “Do you not agree, Belle?”

Belle had spent a lot of time running through those back alleys with Jo. “Of course. We ladies are more resourceful than most, much more than anyone seems to think.”

“Ha!” Evelyn agreed, giving her husband a triumphant smile. He merely shook his head in mock surrender.

Westfield snorted. “The fact remains that you should not even have those urchin contacts of yours in the first place. You are a lady, not a back-alley savior.”

St. Aldwyn put his hand over Jo’s lips before she could blast Westfield with her opinion.

Derek nodded. “Be as it may, Lady Josephine has the contacts we need. But more to the point, the lower class trust her.”

“What is it you would have us do?” Belle asked.

Westfield frowned in her direction before instant concern lit his

brow.

She must look a fright.

Derek turned his undivided attention to her, perhaps sensing that as the only unattached female, and therefore the only one without a male to dictate her actions, and so if she chose to be part of this project, the others might follow suit.

“We are to investigate, discreetly, his whereabouts and if possible, the reason for his return. It is my hope that you would ask around, through your own contacts, any information relating to him.”

Belle studied Derek with an unwavering regard. His eyes seemed to speak a truth that none of the other men recognized. The arrogant weasel knew who she was—at least, he knew she was the infamous Madam De La Frey. It was why she’d been included in any of these schemes in the first place. No one other than Jo and Evelyn knew about her role as the infamous designer. Well, they and possibly the mercenary. And now it would appear Derek Shaw. Maybe even his brother.

Too many people in her good opinion.

Of course, her contacts may prove to be even more valuable than Jo’s urchins.

With a nod of assent to Shaw, Belle sauntered over to the window, needing to clear her mind. Gray clouds hovered overhead. It suited her mood.

“I suppose it would be easy enough to ask around,” Jo murmured. “I will, however, need a description of this Edgar De Roux.”

Derek retrieved a small portrait from his pocket and handed it to Jo. Belle did not need to study the portrait to know what her friend would see. She glimpsed Jo’s expression through the reflection of the window and saw the surprise that registered in her eyes. Ah yes, Edgar’s face was utterly deceptive in its beauty; it could strike a woman blind.

“Well,” Jo said, clearing her throat. “I daresay it’s a face that won’t be forgotten.”

St. Aldwyn snatched the portrait from his wife’s fingertips. “Stop ogling the bastard.”

Jo gave Belle a look that practically said, “Do you see what I have to put up with?”

Belle managed to tilt her lips upward in response.

“What do we know about the night he escaped?” Grey asked, taking Evelyn’s hand in his.

Derek, noticing the gesture, paused before answering. “We suspect it happened in the early morning actually, and that he escaped by boat, likely dressed as a fisherman. A woman’s scream and a gunshot had been heard, but when officials arrived, no one was found. Only a pool of blood remained on the scene. It is uncertain whether the

woman was involved or if it was even her stain.”

The silence that fell over the room was deafening.

Belle’s entire body turned to ice. She clutched her side, where the scar of his betrayal still ran ragged. Never had she imagined anyone would be so knowledgeable of that horrible night.

It terrified her.

Belle swallowed as she noted Westfield and Grey share a look. They did not like nor did they trust this new development. Evelyn would not become part of this project.

“My wife will not be involved in such dangerous matters,” Grey confirmed Belle’s suspicion aloud. The grip on his wife’s shoulders when she would have protested tightened. “That is final, Evelyn.”

Evelyn remained silent, her cheeks flushed with anger. Belle knew that look. She would let the matter go. For now.

“I will not lie, this is a dangerous man,” Derek said with a sigh, the first trace of uncertainty he’d shown. “I would never ask this of anyone, but all of you have a unique position in society to get the word out. I understand your concern, Grey, though I will say that the women will never be in any danger, as acquiring information from their own contacts and circles is the full extent of their involvement.”

Not true, Belle thought, closing her eyes, the scars on her body still tingling.

They were all in danger. Just being connected to her was enough to risk their lives. This was no ordinary spy. He took pleasure in inflicting pain and enjoyed the thrill of the dangerous game. He would know the exact moment inquiries were made; his eyes and ears were always everywhere.

Pain stabbed her chest as she battled for control over her wobbling legs. She could not allow danger to descend upon her friends. They had to hear the truth. They deserved it.

“Could he have killed whoever helped him, perhaps?” Belle heard Evelyn ask. She ignored her husband’s pointed stare as she asked the question.

Oh, he’d tried, Belle mulled darkly, her earlier resolve strengthening. She was clear once again on what needed to be done.

“It’s possible, but still does not explain the missing body or why no one with fatal wounds ever received treatment from any nearby doctor—and we inquired with many,” Derek answered.

“No one received treatment *that you are aware of*,” Westfield emphasized.

“It would make sense,” James conceded, interjecting his opinion before his brother could respond. “If whoever he hurt survived, that may be reason enough for his return. It could be that he has unfinished business, loose ends to tie up.”

Jo shook her head. "Or we are looking at this entirely wrong. What if it's not the list or the escape or any unfinished business he came back for, but rather another reason?"

St. Aldwyn sighed, realizing that his wife would not let this go. Jo was already attempting to solve the puzzle.

"There's no other reason," Belle said, her voice firm with both determination and steely conviction.

"You have insight on the matter?" James asked. "Or have you already heard something of significance?"

That caught Westfield's attention. "Why would she have heard anything of significance?"

James smile turned sly. "The more important question is where."

For pity's sake.

Westfield turned to Belle questioningly and she sighed before addressing the room. "If he has returned, it's not because his mission failed, but because it never ended. He must be here to finish what he started four years ago."

To Belle's utter vexation she was met with only thoughtful stares, nary a suspicious one. Well, except for Westfield's narrow regard. She was going to have to spell this out for them, then.

"A rather good point, Lady Belle," James said with a nod.

It was Derek Shaw's suspicious nature that prompted him to say, "A very good observation, indeed, but hardly concrete."

Steely eyes locked with arrogant ones. "There is no other reason."

Suspicion blossomed in his gaze.

Finally.

"Do you have proof of this observation that we are not aware of?"

Belle had always imagined that when the day of reckoning came, the skies would thunder and, if she was lucky, the earth would open up and swallow her into its depths. Instead, she stood in a room filled with her dearest friends, knowing that once she revealed the truth, they would condemn her for it. But as she stared at all their beloved faces, she felt nothing but a complete calm settle over her.

"I know because I am the one that helped Edgar De Roux escape."

Chapter 5

At first, Belle thought they hadn't heard her. But then, as if it hadn't just taken its sweet time, the truth suddenly revealed itself in their shocked faces and their blank eyes that blinked once, twice, before finally widening in disbelief.

St. Aldwyn's jaw dropped open.

Jo blinked as her brows creased.

Grey's back straightened.

Evelyn's eyes rounded to saucers.

Westfield's face lost all color.

The brother's lips parted, at a loss.

It was rather comical to witness, Belle mused. Clearly, no one would ever have expected this turn of events.

"Hell."

"Why did you never tell us?"

A fierce scowl.

"Oh dear."

"Belle—"

Belle turned toward Westfield at his soft murmur of her name but stopped when she spotted the brothers, their shoulders widening even more if that was possible.

Evelyn and Jo, also noting the subtle change in their demeanor, suddenly sprang into action the same time, causing Belle to jerk. Each of them took a post by her side, a mixture of determination and defiance etched to the lift of their chins. Their eyes challenged the men to take any sort of action.

Tears burned in the back of Belle's eyes at their display of loyalty. They would not abandon her then. She blinked the wetness away. Now was *not* the time to break apart.

James was the first to act, taking a step closer, his eyes ever watchful as he narrowed them on the women. As a result, St. Aldwyn and Grey tensed, positioning themselves in line with their wives, while Westfield moved in front of them all, in an easy position to protect Belle.

Derek, calm as ever, broke the sudden tension that cloaked the room in thick waves of unease. "There is no need for this cavemen behavior—it's giving me an ache in my skull. Perhaps, Lady Belle, you should elaborate on your statement."

"I agree," James seconded. "It is imperative that we catch this man and no harm will befall you, that is assuming you did not help a foreign spy steal valuable information that could have caused the death of countless of men."

Belle pushed past Westfield, halting when he grabbed her wrist in a vise grip and pulled her next to him.

"I did not know Edgar was a spy until the evening I foolishly assisted him in his escape," Belle snapped, her eyes not wavering from James's. "I arranged everything, believing that Edgar was in grave danger from his family. It was only on our way to the docks that he transformed into a stranger, boasting about how he stole information that would change everything."

She spared a glance at Derek. "I did not understand what he was going on about and probably wouldn't have thought anything of it if his accent had not slipped, revealing him to be a liar."

Painful memories assaulted Belle. The clatter of hooves as they reached the docks and the stench of that vile place were still fresh in her mind. His evil laughter and his mocking of everyone he'd fooled, including her, still haunted her.

"It's all right Belle, you do not have to speak of it if you don't want to," Jo murmured in a soft tone, touching her shoulder.

Belle shook her head. They deserved the truth, did they not? And she so desperately wished to crack open the rotten shell of the burden that she'd bore alone these past four years.

Her voice trembled as she continued, "Suspicion arose, but I pretended not to notice his slip. I even smiled when he waved the white parchment in my face and then I devised a plan which worked, for the most part, though he still got away. At least, I lived to keep the tale a secret."

"You were afraid for your life, that's understandable," Evelyn comforted.

From across the room, James shifted on his feet. "How did you meet?" he asked.

Belle looked away. "Does it matter?"

"I suppose not."

“And the parchment?” Derek asked.

Belle’s smile held no humor. “Picked it from his pocket. I may have been blind to his true character, but I would not allow him to leave with whatever information he stole.”

“Where is it now?” Grey asked.

Someone else stole it from me again.

Yet, another failure of hers, one she did not feel inclined to share. What would be the point? The information had never been used—Derek had said as much. It would be counterproductive to shift their attention away from Edgar to information that had been lost for years. Better for them, and her, to keep their focus on finding that french serpent.

“I destroyed it,” she lied.

They seemed to believe her, even though her voice had been a broken croak. And luckily, everyone seemed to forget about the blood and the scream. Some memories were too painful to relive. She preferred to leave that one behind her, if possible.

“So Edgar has returned for the information he believes may still be in your possession, maybe even for revenge,” Derek stated as a matter of fact.

Blast. She was going to have to tell them after all.

“Like hell he did,” Westfield muttered under his breath, his grip tightening on her wrist even more. Belle shot Westfield a look and twisted out of his hold, her heart hammering in her chest. “He is not here for me, or at least I am not the reason he returned.”

That earned her more confused stares.

“Edgar believes me to be dead,” Belle explained, her voice barely audible.

Jo spoke first, her sharp mind ever quick. “He discovered you stole from him. You fought. That is why blood stained the docks. He did not use the information he stole, so you must have been the one to shoot him. But why would he believe *you* dead?”

Belle remained silent, her face pale and her hands trembling. After a moment she whispered, “That’s not exactly what happened.” Sweat beaded on her forehead as she fought down the memories. “I did shoot him yes, but only after he managed to stab me. I lost consciousness and when I came to, he was gone. Believing me dead, or dying, he managed to retrieve the envelope, but took the wrong one.”

“What did he take?” Evelyn asked.

Belle shrugged. “Some of the sketches I drew.”

“That still doesn’t explain why he returned. It doesn’t make sense. He would have no use for whatever he stole back then, except if he planned on selling it to foreign governments,” James muttered.

“Even then, the information is old,” Derek muttered.

Belle shifted uncomfortably, drawing James's attention.

"You took a peak?"

Indignation rose. "Yes, I decided to take a look at the information I almost died for because I thought that plunging myself into even more danger was a marvelous idea."

"Fair enough," James muttered.

"However," Belle continued, "I have reason to believe that the information was not a list at all, but sketches."

"Why do you suppose that?" Derek asked, his voice filled with mistrust.

"Because the sketches he took off me were my drawings of residences and their imagined interior. Why else would he confuse them rather than look for another envelope?"

The implication of her assumption was clear and stunned everyone. Edgar had been plotting an assassination attempt. Why else would one require sketches of constructions? Or residences?

"And you told no one of this?" Derek's question whipped through the room, his voice steel.

"No," Belle responded in affront.

"Do you have any idea what you've done by keeping your silence?" Derek accused. "He could have assassinated royalty, plunging this entire country into a war. A war that would have been your fault."

Belle's temper sparked at his threatening tone.

"Need I remind you that I needn't have informed you of my part in any of this mess? And how convenient for you to lay the blame on my doorstep." She paused, her tone indignant when she continued, "I did not attend spy school, and unlike the *spies in this room*, I was not even aware a French one infiltrated our country at the time. Even then, I still intercepted a criminal, obtained and protected stolen information, put my life in danger and never breathed a word of the entire episode to anyone. That is more than you can say about many."

If Derek Shaw was shocked at her outburst, he did not show it, but Belle thought she saw a flash of admiration in his eyes.

"This isn't just a dire matter, Shaw," Grey growled, "It's a bloody dangerous mess. My wife and I will not partake in this."

"I believe it is too late for that, husband," Evelyn whispered. "If this Edgar discovers Belle has not died as he believed, then none of us will be safe."

The men glanced at each other as the truth of her words sunk in. Evelyn had only echoed what Belle had known from the beginning. By association, their lives were in peril.

"Well, I for one am looking forward to some adventure!" Jo chirped. She silenced her husband with a look when he started to protest. "Come now Damien, you've been sulking about the house in boredom

and I've been made to watch. Domestic bliss outside the bedchamber does not suit either of us."

James's bark of laughter echoed through the room and Belle had to suppress a chuckle. Bless her heart, Jo knew just how to break the tension with her inappropriate statements.

St. Aldwyn sighed in dramatic fashion. "I do not sulk, but alas, you may have a point, my dear."

"I always do," Jo murmured with an impish smile. She turned to Belle. "Do not worry, we will catch this villain."

Evelyn nodded. "You will never carry this burden alone again."

Belle's tears did flow this time and she embraced her friends. It occurred to her then she had been entirely wrong. They'd never abandon her. They had accepted her mistake without a moment of doubt or judgment. Even if it was really her burden to bear, she was grateful for their continued friendship all the same.

Derek cleared his throat, his expression grim. "If he knows you are alive, Lady Belle, perhaps we can draw him out with that knowledge."

"Over my dead body," Westfield snarled. "He already hurt her once. I will not take the chance with her life or anyone else's." His face was pinched with something akin to pain, yet his emerald eyes refused to meet her hers.

One moment he acted like the protective male and the other he was blatantly furious with her. She did not understand it.

Derek did not bat an eye. "That is not your call, but Lady Belle's."

Belle's gaze flicked between the two men, before settling on Westfield. By his clenched jaw, she could tell he wanted to protest Derek's statement. Her heart lurched a little in her chest then. Did he perhaps care for her beyond his gentlemanly obligation to protect all females? Was his interest perhaps personal?

She shook her head to clear it of the notion and looked away. "He is right, Westfield. If Edgar discovers I'm alive, he will come for me. It will be the best opportunity to catch him." Her stomach jolted at the words.

"Damnation, Belle! You will put your life in danger again?" Westfield growled.

Belle turned back to him then, her neck craning to catch his regard. "My life is already in danger, lest we catch him."

His lips curved in distaste, but he said nothing, only continued to clench his jaw. Resolve entered his eyes and the lines of his face. She sensed that he seemed to have come to a decision that he did not see fit to share.

Oh dear.

"We will keep watch on you every moment, Lady Belle. You will never be alone. You have my word," James said.

Belle nodded, still wary of problems to come.

“What would you have her do?” Westfield asked.

Derek ran a hand through his disheveled hair, a sign that he was a man of many thoughts. “I propose Lady Belle go about her normal routine. If Edgar is about, she will have to do no more than that.”

Evelyn and Jo nodded to that.

“I agree,” Belle murmured distractedly. “He was at the masked ball; I am certain of it. It only stands to reason that he will attend other events, as well.”

“What!” Evelyn and Jo both screeched simultaneously.

Westfield cursed.

The other men scowled down at her.

“Why did you not say anything earlier?” Jo asked, perplexed.

“It must have slipped my mind amidst bearing my deepest, darkest secret,” Belle retorted.

Jo nodded in assent to her point.

“Are you certain it was him?” Westfield asked, his shoulders now bunched and his fists clenched tightly.

Belle nodded. “I am certain of it.”

“So we must assume he may already know you are alive,” James stated.

Derek heaved a heavy sigh. “He knows. He would have studied his surroundings before he entered them.”

Fear threatened to choke her. While she’d been blissfully unaware of his presence in England, he may have already been very much aware of hers? The notion greatly unsettled her.

“He will take action soon then,” Grey observed.

Westfield, Grey and St. Aldwyn shared a glance. Unspoken words passed between them. This matter was nothing like the projects Jo, Evelyn and Belle had gotten into in the past. It would appear the age of indulgence was over.

Belle felt the men’s resolve strengthen at the prospect of danger.

The women also held an entire conversation with only a look.

“Of all the arrogance!”

“We will not allow them to stuff us in a closet.”

“Thank you for not condemning me.”

“We would never abandon you.”

The men would be impossible. Arrogance was an expected trait from a lord and, as an unspoken rule, women tolerated men’s entitlement. But now, in light of this danger, they would be insufferable to manage. Because as another unspoken rule, at least among these gentlemen, they had learned to allow their women their freedom both as a token of respect and to maintain their sanity—now that was about to end.

Here we go, yet again, Belle's inner voice echoed in her mind.

Chapter 6

Moonlight glinted through the window in Belle's bedchambers, illuminating the room in soft but brilliant light. She stretched out on her bed, like a tigress awaking from a long slumber, her chemise exposing much of her naked legs to the moon. Out of habit, she lifted her arm so that she may watch the glow of the light play across her skin.

How magical would it be if she could to catch that light in the palm of her hand? It had always been a favorite past time of hers—bathing in the illumination of the night's sun. It also happened to be when inspiration most often struck for the designs of her gowns.

Oh, the tales her gowns would tell!

And was it any wonder she preferred the night to the day? The dark lent far more mysteriousness than that of its counterpart, which often revealed the harsh truths of reality. In the shadows of the night, one could transform into something magical, something more exceptional than ordinary.

Though Belle was well aware one could not avoid the truth, the allure to surrender to the embrace of the night and its fantastical tales remained strong for her.

An unexpected movement in the corner of her vision caught her attention. Her senses went on alert.

"Charlemagne?" she called, her eyes roaming the room for her hound.

Her heart plummeted in sudden fear as she turned her head to glance the slightly ajar door. In it stood the outline of a man and her breath caught as she reached beneath the pillow for her letter opener. The man stepped forward and a familiar silhouette came into view under the glowing moon.

Her breath came out in a whoosh. "Dear Mother Mary! Westfield! What in the blazes are you about? You nearly scared me to death!"

He came to a halt when he caught sight of her legs.

Belle's cheeks reddened in embarrassment as his eyes traveled down the length of her form. Rooted a few feet away from her, his gaze finally locked with hers.

"You should be scared. That could easily have been De Roux."

So he was concerned about the beast. It still did not explain his presence in her room.

"What are you doing here?" Belle asked, ignoring the reprimand in his voice.

"What are you doing?" he countered. "Have you no concern for your welfare," he motioned at her with his hand, "dressed like that?"

Her welfare? What did that have to do with how she was dressed?

"I'm—" She shook her head. How had he turned it back around to her? The oaf. "I live here. I can do as I please. You, on the other hand, are intruding on my privacy, not to mention trespassing."

"On the contrary, my dear."

"What on earth does that mean?" Belle asked, staring at the hard planes of his face.

She was curious as to his intentions. His usual charming façade was gone, replaced by this, this...character. Not to mention how highly improper it was for him to be here in her chambers, alone. A delicious shiver made its way down to her toes before she could help it.

Simon could hardly breathe when he caught sight of Belle sprawled on her bed, her legs marvelously exposed in the pale moonlight. It took all of his strength to keep his eyes locked with hers and not continually wandering down her enticing body.

"What on earth does that mean?" she'd asked.

Well, she was about to find out. Without a word, he moved closer to the bed, his eyes never leaving hers. When she did not protest or even move, he took a seat on the side of her bed. She scooted over to make more room for him, and Simon thought: *To hell with it.*

So he lay down beside her, their eyes still riveted on one another. It was not an uncomfortable silence, but a peaceful silence, as though they'd both found mutual solitude in the moment.

"You do not cover your windows."

Something flashed in her eyes, but it was gone before he recognized it. "I prefer them uncovered."

"You seem to enjoy the company of the moon. I've never given much thought to it before now."

His body somehow shifted without seeming to, their faces almost touching as they studied each other.

Her lips twitched. "It's not something one should give thought to, but rather stop and behold its beauty."

"Perhaps. But it is still not as beautiful as you."

The words left his mouth before he could stop them. He did not regret them. Though, he did inwardly curse his lack of control when it seemed to break the spell, causing Belle to look away.

"Why are you here, Westfield? You must be aware how improper it is."

His mouth settled into a grim line, but he attempted to keep his tone light. "I have decided to take up residence."

Her head snapped back to him in surprise before anger flashed in her stormy blue eyes. "No."

"It's already done."

"And what does my aunt have to say about that?"

"I did not think to ask her." He held up his hand when she would have protested. "Your brothers aren't here to offer their protection and your aunt can hardly stand upright. Until this madman is found, I will arrive in the evenings and leave before the crack of dawn."

Belle huffed. "That cursed skunk-breathed man will only be found if he wishes to be discovered. We must lure him out."

"Skunk-breathed?" he chuckled. He was pleased to see he'd tempted a responding smile from her lips.

"I enjoy insulting him in creative ways whenever possible."

"I approve. But we will find him, Belle. He will not get a chance to come near you again."

"I am to be the bait. It is not as simple as continuing with my daily routine."

His heart lurched in his chest. Her life would be in danger every day until this lunatic was caught.

"You will not be bait. No, that is an awful plan. Why not remain in your room until the scoundrel is found, instead?"

Yes, that sounded like the best plan to him.

She shook her head, a blond curl falling over her eyes.

His hand twitched, aching to smooth it back.

"You can forget about controlling me. I'm not some delicate miss you can lock away in her room at any sign of danger."

"If only you were," he muttered, before more loudly asking, "Did you love him?"

The question had been burning inside him since she confessed her part. Her soft sigh was like a vise grip on his heart.

"At the time, I thought I did, but I was still mourning the death of my parents and eager for an adventure to distract me...I think I would have loved a toothless pirate back then."

Simon snorted. "Your brothers should not have abandoned you for

their own adventures.”

“Bradford and Quinn had to manage their grief in their own way. I do not blame them as much as I blame myself.”

Simon did not agree, but he did not continue to argue the point. So much about Belle made sense to him now. “That bastard is the reason you remain unmarried, isn’t he?”

Silence met his statement. He plunged forward into the rest of his suspicions. “It was your blood the authorities found, your scream they heard.”

He caught the slight flinch of her face before she stiffened.

“My apologies, I did not mean to make you uncomfortable. It’s just that you clutched your middle when you said he stabbed you. It looked as though you’d seen a ghost or were reliving a horror. You truly almost died, did you not?” the last said in a low whisper.

“When you state it like that it sounds just horrible.”

“But it is true, is it not?” he pressed.

“Yes.”

His chest tightened at her soft murmur of confirmation. To think of her nearly dying felt painful.

“Though, regarding the marriage portion of your deduction,” she continued, “it is not for the reason you may have deduced. He is part of the reason I did not marry, yes, but he is not all of it. When you make the wrong choice in such matters, it is not something you can escape from.”

Simon wondered at that. He had always approached the notion of marriage rather practically. Not for himself, mind you, but in his considerations of Evelyn, when she’d been determined to never marry. For him, it seemed odd that any lady would not wish to secure a husband. It was, after all, the practical thing to do. And Simon believed in practicality above all. “So there may be more to marriage than just practicality then.”

Belle’s laughter drew his attention away from his own musings. “Ever practical, that is what you are. Is that why you took up, rather inappropriately I might add, residence here?”

Simon grunted. “It seemed like a more practical solution for your protection. I have also concluded females are incapable of making decisions based purely on practicality, thus your decision to take up with De Roux had to be, however unintentional, one of the heart. That is how I deduced his involvement in your reason not to marry.”

Belle snorted. “Take up with? How utterly male of you to suppose so much. Like I’ve said, he was an adventure, and *nothing* more.”

“Your *adventure* did some kind of insurmountable damage if it caused you to decide to never marry after him.” He regretted his words instantly—they went too far. He felt her go rigid beside him

again. "I am sorry, that was uncalled for."

Those heated eyes settled on him. "You do not know anything about me, Westfield. Never forget that and never assume that you do."

Hell.

But she was right. He did not know what had happened between her and De Roux. He did not know very much else about her personal affairs either.

Yet.

"It could have happened to anyone, Belle," he said, attempting to gain some control again.

"You *still* misunderstand me, Westfield. My heart is not broken irrecoverably because I trusted the wrong man. And neither is my soul crushed or anything as melodramatic as any of that. I simply do not wish to marry."

"Yet he is part of the reason."

"Of course. The man manipulated and fooled me. But he also showed me, *however, unintentionally*," he cringed when she threw his own words back at him, "the value of life." Her eyes bored into his. "That is why I chose not to marry."

Then she did the most surprising thing, she took his hand in his and placed it on her abdomen. He could feel raised and jagged skin there. A scar? She traced the line of the scar, showing him that it ran from the center over to the side, just above the hip. It seemed impossible that she had survived such a wound, but here she was with her wide blue eyes, two little freckles on her left cheek, sinful and utterly kissable lips.

"He is as part of the reason in the same way that this scar is part of my body. It is a part, but not the whole."

Something in Simon melted at her words. No one should ever have to learn the value of life at such a cost. It made him want to strangle the bastard.

His hand trembled as she dropped it again.

Still, he pressed, lowering his voice to a whisper, "Have you ever thought that by denying yourself, love, marriage, a family, you are letting him win?"

"Let it go, Westfield. It is my choice to make."

Simon wanted to throttle her brothers. They should never have left Belle alone in her grief and later alone to her own devices. It was incomprehensible.

What the bloody hell had they been thinking?

And Belle was wrong about her choice to remain unattached. Being alone was not the way to truly value life. And who better than Simon to show her just how wrong she was in that assumption?

"You should not be here," she muttered, breaking his train of

thought. "You should leave."

"Neither should you be bait, but as you insist on being stubborn, so I will insist on it, as well."

"Derek and James are watching over me. I will never be alone."

Simon scoffed. "They can rot in hell for all I care. I don't trust them with your safety."

"What have they done to warrant such animosity, might I ask?"

"They involved my sister in a dangerous project. No man worth his salt would ever allow a lady to venture into harm's way."

"They would never have let any harm befall Evelyn or me. Besides, *you* are a gentleman worth his salt, are you not, and yet here I am, venturing into danger with you by my side."

"Stubborn women, the lot of you," Simon grouched.

She smiled at that. "Be that as it may, I must insist on your departure. Perhaps you have not given adequate thought to my reputation and what might happen if it were ever discovered that you stayed overnight here."

"Your aunt is in residence and she serves as your chaperone."

"Yet it is also well known that my aunt cannot keep her eyes open for more than ten minutes on end."

"Much can happen in ten minutes," Simon agreed. *Much.*

"Where do you plan to sleep? In the servant's quarters? In disguise?"

"No."

"In Quinn's chambers, then?"

His eyes lowered to her lips and he heard her slight intake of breath. "No."

"In Bradford's chambers?"

"No to that, too." His voice had changed to a hoarse whisper.

Her lips parted slightly but no sound emerged. "Then where are you planning to sleep?"

"Here."

His whisper was muted as his lips touched hers in a gentle kiss. When she made no movement of retreat, he softly ran his tongue over her lower lip. A moan sounded at the back of her throat and that was all the encouragement he needed.

"You taste like heaven," he growled before deepening the kiss. He shifted his weight then, his much larger frame covering hers as his knee settled over her and she rolled into him.

Somewhere in the back of Belle's mind, self-preservation battled to gather her scattered wits. It was only when his knee parted her thighs that her senses returned full force and she pushed out of his embrace, scrambling from the bed.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, her breath coming out in short gasps.

An arrogant brow lifted, though he seemed to fight to gain control over the lust she saw in his gaze.

“I thought that was quite obvious. I was kissing you.”

She exhaled, her body still quivering from his onslaught to her senses. “Yes, but why—wait, never mind the reason, it cannot happen again.”

His jaw clenched and the fire returned to his eyes. “The reason matters. I’ve wanted to kiss you for a very long time.”

He wanted to kiss her for a very long time.

Belle’s mouth dropped open but she shut it just as quick. “You must leave, now. This,” she waved her hand over him and the bed, “must never happen again.”

An implacable mask settled over his face as he rose to his feet, his stormy gaze plastered to her face. The muscles in his arms flexed, as though it took all of his willpower not to shake her to her senses.

Well, he could bunch his arms all he’d like—her senses were very much in place! She supposed she must look quite seductive, only semi-clad and with her mass of blond hair cascading down to her waist. Still, that was no reason to behave so ridiculously out of character.

“I’m staying here until De Roux is caught and dealt with, whether you like it or not.”

Farthing hell! This could not be happening.

But by the stubborn set of his jaw, Belle knew he would not change his mind.

Insufferable man.

“Very well, I can see there is no use in fighting you on this. You will not, however, be sharing my chambers.”

“What if De Roux attacks you and I cannot get to you in time?”

“I can hold him off until you arrive all heroic and out of breath.”

Simon shook his head once. “What if he attacks you and I don’t hear it?”

“That will not happen.”

A vein in his jaw ticked, but Belle could be just as stubborn. She folded her arms over her chest. “I’m afraid I must insist.”

“Fine,” he growled.

“Good. You can sleep in one of my brother’s chambers if you prefer. No servant will bother you there.”

A low growl rumbled in his chest, but he said nothing as he stalked from her room with a nod of acknowledgment. Once he was gone, she let out the breath she’d been holding. She lifted a trembling hand to her lips, where his tongue had tempted her.

He’d completely taken her by the unawares. Not just by his kiss, but

also by her intense reaction to him. How confounding. This was Westfield! Brother to her dear friend Evelyn! A beautiful, yes, but infuriating man!

So fine, she may have entertained a fantasy or two, but she never imagined *this*! Sure, she outrageously flirted with men on most occasions, but at most, they'd only managed to ever tempt a smile from her. Westfield had managed to turn her entire world upside down with just one kiss.

Belle began to think that allowing him to stay in her house at all had been a terribly *bad* idea.

Chapter 7

“It has been a week and that damn Frenchman has yet to make an appearance,” James Shaw growled.

Assembled at the residence of Lord and Lady St. Aldwyn, Belle understood James’s bitterness. *A week of torture.* She bore his frustration as her own, but for entirely a different reason. Every night Westfield came to stay under her roof. And even though he retained his distance after that first night and left her alone without any further intrusion on her privacy, it somehow felt worse knowing he was only a few feet away from her—and completely unaffected by her presence.

She, on the other hand, had barely slept. Something that was evident from the dreadful dark circles forming beneath her eyes. Another reason for her disheartenment was the mercenary’s lack of communication. Had he succeeded? Had he failed? Or perhaps he was badly injured, unable to send word? She hadn’t told anyone about him, so he could not have backed off, may even still be on the hunt. This lack of knowledge was the source of her overwrought mind.

I should never have paid him the entire amount.

Who is to say he even bothered to complete his task? Now, in the midst of uncertainty, Belle admitted she should have been smarter about the payment. Paid him only once proof of his success was delivered.

Like Edgar’s head on a proverbial silver plate.

The grave countenances of her friends were a further source of her restlessness. They were suffering, even if only emotionally, because of her. Their fear and concern lay heavy on her mind.

“He is cautious. Perhaps he senses that something is brewing?” Belle offered.

They were all seated in the drawing room, all distracted by their

own thoughts. Well, all except for St. Aldwyn, who comfortably reclined on a chaise and flicked through the daily paper.

Jo's husband seemed to love trouble nearly as much as Jo.

Evelyn and Grey were the only ones noticeably absent from the group.

"A distinct possibility," Derek agreed. "He will keep his distance until he is certain that he is not walking into a trap."

"It may take weeks before he decides to make a move if that is the case," Jo argued.

"I don't like it either," Belle murmured. "Weeks of watching our every step. We are bound to make a mistake under such scrutiny. We may already have."

"I agree." James regarded Belle with somber eyes. "We must lure him out. Bait him into crawling out of his dark hole."

"No," Westfield said forcibly. "It is too dangerous to use her as a carrot."

Belle had half a mind to roll her eyes at his sharp command. Could the man be any more arrogant?

"If he does not make a move soon, we may not have any other choice," Derek murmured.

"It's all right," Belle said in a low voice, her eyes locking with Westfield's steely ones. "I anticipated this from the start. It was inevitable that I'd be the lure. And I want to help. This is my mess."

"No, it's not all right," he bit out. "Someone has to be the voice of reason and draw a line. If it were up to you, you would march into a trap with nothing but your guilt as a guide and they," he jabbed a finger at the Shaws, "would let you."

Belle blinked, certain she'd just been insulted. The careful hold on her temper started to slip. Even if she did die, at least she would die aiding the people she loved and, if she were lucky, that miserable excuse for a man will not pollute the earth's air anymore with his presence.

"It may mean your life, Belle," Westfield pressed.

She inhaled deeply, shivering as her name rolled off his tongue. Before she could stop herself, she blurted, "Well at least I shall die fabulously dressed."

Jo snickered but flushed when Westfield shot her a heated glare.

"This is no laughing matter," he growled. "We will not use a lady as bait."

Belle stood and rested her hands on her hips. "I was the one who assisted in his escape, so I will be the one to lure him back out."

When no one contradicted her, Westfield threw his hands in the air. "This is bullshit! Do you know what he did to her?" Westfield growled at the room's occupants.

“Westfield, no!” Belle exclaimed in horror.

“Do you know what she had to go through to get that piece of paper away from him?”

“Stop it!”

“He didn’t just stab her, he gutted her like an animal without remorse. It was *her* blood they found. She nearly and truly died on that dock.”

Everyone inhaled sharply, including Belle. Shocked gazes swung over to her and she clutched her stomach, feeling as though her old wound had been ripped open again.

He reached for her, but she took a step back from him. “That was not your secret to tell.”

Guilt flashed across his face, but he only clenched his jaw.

“Is that true?” Jo whispered, horror reflected in her eyes.

Belle looked away. “It was a long time ago and I survived. That is all I will say on the matter.”

“Belle—”

“I do not wish to talk about it Jo, ever,” she looked over to Westfield, “again.”

Derek nodded. “Understood. Westfield is right, however, we will bait him another way. You have suffered enough.”

Belle stiffened. “I can do this.”

“We do not doubt that, my lady,” James said in a somber tone. “But when something that traumatic happens to you, something inside you, it changes. It haunts you. Sometimes even taunts you. But it never truly leaves you. We will not have you relive that again.”

Belle stared daggers at all of her friends. Blast them and the damn pity reflected in their eyes. She did not contradict James, for he was right, but she’d accepted what happened to her a long time ago.

“If I may,” St. Aldwyn drawled from beside his wife. “While you are all filling oceans with tears, I may actually have an idea.”

“Damien!” Jo admonished him. “I know you have a heart, however deeply disguised, so use it.”

“Please do not keep us in suspense,” Westfield said, sparing a quick sheepish glance Belle’s way.

Belle snorted. As if St. Aldwyn’s likely horrible idea will actually make her forget *his* betrayal.

“The envelope was destroyed, correct?” St. Aldwyn asked Belle.

She paused.

“De Roux does not know that,” he continued. “We can lure him out with the prospect of its contents.”

Oh, dear.

“That may not be such a bad idea.” Approval rang in Derek’s voice.

James narrowed his eyes on Belle. “You *did* destroy the envelope,

did you not, Lady Belle?"

Confound it!

All eyes flickered to her again and she shook her head. "Not exactly," she hedged, unable to lie this time.

"What the hell does that mean?" James snapped, causing Simon to stiffen and Damien's gaze to sharpen.

"It means that I did not personally destroy it."

Derek's gaze dropped to where her hands fidgeted with the folds of her skirt.

"Do you still have it?" Jo asked.

"No."

"Where the hell is it?" James growled, incredulous.

Belle sighed, standing. "I do not know. When I came to, it was gone."

James looked as though he wanted to throttle her.

"What else have you not told us, Lady Belle?" Derek's voice whipped through the room.

I am barren.

I have nightmares.

I can never marry.

I may very well be falling in love.

Oh, and someone saved me, but I do not know who.

"That is all."

Derek's gaze was unwavering as he stared at her, his face hard with disapproval. Belle recognized the questions in his gaze. Questions like if she was gutted, how exactly had she survived? But he did not ask any of the queries she glimpsed in his eyes—it wasn't relevant to them.

"We cannot lure him with the real papers, anyway, you fool," Westfield snapped in James's direction, causing his thick neck to blotch with redness. "What if something went wrong and he got his filthy hands on the originals?"

"I agree. We do not need the original information," St. Aldwyn said chirpily as if she hadn't committed some horrid crime by lying to them.

"I know that," James growled back. "I'm not demented. But that was not my point."

"The age of documents can be copied, can it not?" Jo interrupted.

Derek nodded. "That is simple enough." He glanced at James, "Can it work, brother?" Everyone knew that Derek was the final say on the plans, so it was clear he had asked mostly to defuse the tension that gripped the occupants of the room.

James's eyes were still planted on Belle. "Whatever information we copy would have to be copied on old paper, but it could work. Well,

Lady Belle?”

Belle swallowed. It was clear what he was asking. Had De Roux taken a good glance at what he stole? How the hell should she know? If he had, it hadn't been in her presence. And she doubted he'd be able to recall it, in any case. It had been years.

All of her friends stared at her expectantly, waiting for her answer. It could work. The villain may even believe she never destroyed the documents—in fact, that might be why he had returned in the first place.

But then again, it may not. She remained uncertain, but she wasn't about to voice that out loud.

“I suppose we can add a red stain or two for theatrical effect.” She did not say that in actuality the paper would have been completely covered with her blood.

To her relief, none of her friends questioned her, nor did they comment on her remark. They looked concerned, but respected her request of silence on the matter.

“We must assume that you are being watched,” Derek muttered, pacing behind St Aldwyn's desk. “It may make our plan easier.”

“And how is that?” Westfield asked.

“Lady Belle will leave her residence cloaked and meet my brother outside of the Black Bull pub, where she will hand him an old, stained envelope. It should become known quickly after that she is not in possession of the plans anymore, but we are. We can proceed from there.”

The Black Bull was on the docks, not far from where...

Belle's gut clenched. “And what if he learns of our meeting and makes an appearance to intercept the information? With my luck, that would most certainly be the case.”

“If he does make an appearance,” James growled, “I will take him out.”

“Well, that seems simple enough,” Belle muttered.

“I will accompany her,” Westfield said.

“No,” Derek said. “I believe Lady Belle has the right of it. If we get word out about the meeting, De Roux may get off his ass and come, giving us the perfect opportunity to take him out. All ends well.”

“All ends well? Stick your nose up your ass, Shaw. I will not let her do this alone, especially if you're practically inviting him to the exchange,” Westfield growled.

St. Aldwyn, who had set his paper aside with a sigh, stepped between the men, even though a desk separated them. “I understand Shaw's logic, my friend,” he drawled and then quickly continued when it looked like Westfield would pummel him, “However, if you sneak into the carriage and stay out of sight, I don't see why you

cannot accompany Lady Belle on this excursion.”

Lady Josephine snorted. “Except that it’s improper.”

St. Aldwyn gave his wife a steamy glance. “Let’s not talk about improper, shall we?”

Belle suppressed a smile. Josephine had seduced a kiss from the most notorious scoundrel in England and Damien had caught her doing so, though they weren’t married at the time. Apparently St. Aldwyn still barred his teeth whenever he was in Craven’s presence.

Derek nodded. “Fine. Now that it’s settled, it is important that we are not seen with you in public from here on out.”

Belle agreed. Better for it not to be known to that foul-breathed blackguard the Shaw brothers were champions of hers in this regard.

It seemed unreal that she would finally be rid of her past. What remained after that would only be the scars.

Chapter 8

Simon stared out of the window of the room he occupied. Quinn's was it? He shook his head. It hardly mattered. He still held distaste for Belle's brothers, still failed to understand how they could ever leave her so unprotected. That fact coupled with his general fury over what was to transpire tomorrow night made for an explosive temperament. He should have fought harder for her not to be used as bait. Now come tomorrow evening, Lady Belle was going to be put in peril to catch a spy.

It went against his very nature to allow such a travesty to take place. A gentleman did not allow a lady to venture knowingly into danger—particularly not the lady he had formed an attachment to.

Not that Belle would ever give a damn about his opinion on the matter. He might as well have been a cockroach under her boot. It infuriated him to have a woman disregard everything he said with a single, haughty look. And he'd been the recipient of many of those the past few days. He'd also gained renewed regard and sympathy for his friends, who were married to similar females. Perhaps there was something to learn from the two men, but in light of their previous blunders, it might be better not to listen to any of their advice.

From his vantage point, he had a clear view of the gardens below and was surprised to note slight figure by the pond, which was nestled in the center of the garden. Blond hair cascaded down her back to her waist.

Belle.

Blood hell!

His breath hitched in his throat. Moonlight illuminated her form, giving her the appearance of a temptress created for the night. She halted at the edge of the pond, dipping her toes into the water and

causing small ripples to form. He watched mesmerized as she kneeled, her fingers combing through the water which caused larger ripples to take shape. Then to his utter amazement, she cupped the water in her hands and let it run down her exposed neck.

The breath left his body in a loud whoosh.

Sudden, forceful anger eclipsed his desire. What the hell was she doing? De Roux could be lurking out in the shadows!

He considered calling her back into the house, but that would only rouse the servants and perhaps even her aunt. And since he was supposed to remain undetected, that may pose a rather unexplainable problem. No, he would go down and give her the tongue lashing she deserved.

Yet, he loathed taking his eyes off of her. What if she disappeared on his way down to the gardens? Then again, his Belle possessed sturdy lungs.

Turning on his heels, he left at a run, determined to put her in her place and not think about the fact that she resembled a water nymph waiting to be seduced.

Belle kneeled beside the pond and cooled her body. She'd been restless and unable to fall asleep. Even more than her disturbing worries over that troll of a French spy, dreams of a certain earl had plagued her. Heated, passionate dreams that scorched her very soul.

A soft moan escaped her as the cool water dripped down her neck and dampened her nightgown. She wore no robe to cover her exposed skin, and though she had absentmindedly thought that her gown was a bit too revealing for the outdoors, she'd decided it was dark after all.

As one of her designs, it had been created to tempt even the most disinterested of hearts. It wasn't exactly meant for garden explorations, but there was something comforting about feeling so self-possessed, so sensual and comfortable in one's own skin. That was what her creations were really all about and perhaps that was the comfort she'd sought when she put it on earlier. She'd felt rather out of control as of late.

Belle wondered whether she would truly die this time round. She hoped not. Her gravestone would never hear the end of it.

A sudden thought claimed her then. She wanted Simon to kiss her again, to feel his lips pressed against hers. She traced her lower lip with a damp finger.

But she'd be better off without such desires. His temporary occupation of her home was dangerous enough and if she wasn't careful, she'd find herself married to an earl in the blink of any eye.

That must never happen.

Even so, that did not mean Belle could not appreciate the way his

muscles rippled underneath his clothing. Not that she could actually see his muscles move, but she possessed an active imagination. Already her thoughts wandered, obsessing over the laughter that always seemed present in his countenance and the way his deliciously full lips would press together whenever he disapproved of something she said.

She shook her head.

This was not the time to fantasize about Simon Tremaine!

The soft padding of footsteps across the grass alerted her to an intruder and she stilled. She turned her head to glance at the approaching figure and her jaw dropped.

As if he'd just stepped out from her imagination, Simon stood a few feet away from her, clad in nothing but his breeches. Her gaze dropped to this exposed skin of his rippled chest in obvious fascination. She could tell she'd been right about his masculine form. Slowly, her eyes lifted to meet his and she inhaled sharply when she recognized the possessive desire reflected there.

Simon almost did a double take. As it were, his breath had been knocked from his lungs and all common sense had vanished at the sight before him. He stared at her, dumbstruck, his tongue unable to form words let alone reprimand her foolishness.

Her plunging neckline revealed bountiful breasts, ripe for his mouth to devour. Oh, but those legs. His eyes roamed down to the leg that was almost completely exposed to his gaze. He wanted nothing more than to trail kisses from the arch of her foot up to the soft flesh of her thigh.

Bloody hell.

"What in hades are you wearing?" he growled before he could think better of it.

Her eyes narrowed on him, specifically on his bare chest. "What are *you* wearing?"

He glanced down at his attire, or rather lack thereof. "I am not at question here. That thing," he motioned to her nightgown, "is hardly proper."

A mischievous grin spread across her face "How so? I would imagine many a man would sell a tooth for his wife to wear such nightwear. I would even wager to say there would be less unhappy marriages in England."

He scoffed. "Even if that were true, you, my dear, are not married. You've no reason to parade around in the dead of night so scandalously attired."

With that, he suddenly recalled the reason he had sought her out. "And what are you doing lurking about in the garden? Dangerous men

are roaming about and can very well be in search of you or hiding in the shadows.”

She said nothing but rose to her feet. Simon could only stare as she sauntered over to him, the provocative sway her hips holding him transfixed. “That may be, but is it not more exhilarating to live dangerously?”

“You are playing a reckless game, Lady Belle.”

Elegant eyebrows lifted. “I am playing dangerous games? Were you not the one who decided to move into the residence of a lady? Not very proper of you, my lord.”

“I did it for your safety. You need the protection of a man.”

Simon sensed rather than saw her eyes roll heavenward. She would not be tamed nor would she listen to reason—to him.

“I’ve always been of the view that men think too much of their skills as protectors, but even I must admit that while it irks me to take orders from arrogant baboons, there is something very wicked in being ordered about.”

Fire danced in her eyes as she advanced on him. “Are you calling me an arrogant baboon?” was all the response Simon could manage.

“Dear lord no, but I must confess a certain heedless part of me awakens when you are near. Perhaps it is because of your insistence to abide by all things proper.”

Simon stood still, at a loss for words.

“At least if I were to die tonight, I’d die with the knowledge that I did not cower in fear, but lived my days in full.”

That snapped him out of his trance. “Dammit all to hell, you are not permitted to die. And this is indecent and dangerous,” he growled. He wanted to shake her and make her see reason, but some part of him knew it was not wise to touch her just now.

“Do not be such a bore, Westfield. I could die just as easily from a bee sting as I could from a madman. The key is to enjoy every moment you are gifted with. Is that so wrong?”

His gaze dropped to her lips, his voice hoarse when he growled, “You believe me a bore simply because I am a gentleman and you wish to live on the edge of danger without one? Well, allow me to oblige you.”

He gave her no chance to react, but snatched her arm and yanked her up against him in one fell swoop, his lips capturing hers in a wild and punishing kiss. Her lips parted in a surprised gasp and Simon took advantage of the opening to plunge his tongue into her mouth.

Instead of fighting him, her grip on his shoulders tightened as she pushed her lithe body further up against him. He nearly expired on the spot. A growl rumbled in his chest when she started kissing him back, her tongue dancing with his with the same abandon.

Just as suddenly, the assault gentled, whether it came from her or from him, he could not say. He gentled his embrace, cradling her in his arms. Only Belle possessed the power to reduce him to this growling mess.

Her lips widened against his and he pulled away to stare down at her with amusement. "Why are you smiling?" he asked.

The suspicion in his tone drew a chuckle from her.

"I was just thinking that the nightgown served its purpose well."

With a trembling hand, he raked his fingers through his hair, "I kiss you and you think of your bloody nightgown?"

"Why yes, it was created to tempt after all."

"You are a cruel woman, Lady Belle—a true menace to society, a danger to every man in England and his self-esteem."

A sensual laugh echoed through the garden. "I'm hardly any of that, but it is good to know this little creation had been worth the... purchase."

"They should bloody well ban that nightgown," he grumbled, then narrowed his eyes on her. "You enjoyed my kiss."

"That was not the worst kiss I've sampled."

Simon's mood darkened at the thought of other men kissing her.

Mine.

He wanted to erase all memories of other men from her mind. Every single kiss. It was no secret Lady Belle flirted lavishly with gentlemen. For years, he'd watched with detached interest as she lured gentleman to her side with her glamorous smile. At the time, it had been quite astonishing that she remained unwed.

Now that smile was directed at him and he felt a curious shifting in the region of his heart. Understanding was a marvelous thing, he mused. He understood now why she had remained unwed and that her flirtation had been a way to keep men at a certain distance.

He took a step closer to her, his thumb trailing the edge of her jaw. "You expect me to believe that another suitor was better at the art of kissing than me?"

A low, throaty laugh met his ears. "Is the art of kissing not to kiss so passionately, to kiss as if it were the last kiss you will ever receive? You kiss as though you caught a lady in the garden and she wore a pretty nightgown."

"Are you saying my kiss lacked passion?"

It was unthinkable.

She waved a dismissing hand in the air. "I am saying, my dear Lord Westfield, that you stole a kiss. Granted, a stolen kiss is just as exhilarating, but it lacks the fervor of one in which a man kisses a lady as though the world is crumbling around them."

Simon's pulse sped up. "Is that how you wished to be kissed?" The

thought of anyone kissing her in that manner set his teeth on edge. It nettled him almost as much as her continued use of his title.

She tilted her head to the side, her eyes filled with amusement. "I almost died. You see the world differently than I do."

"So the light shines more brilliantly than before," he murmured, surprised by how much he felt the same, though for an entirely different reason.

Her.

"Yes."

Simon watched as her brow creased in puzzlement at his correct assumption—or perhaps she picked up on his sentiment. It was clear to him she had believed no one would be able to peel away the protective layers she'd erected in an act of self-preservation.

But he too had experienced the dullness and bland acceptance of a lackluster life before she burst into his existence with a splash of color. After that, and rather miraculously, he'd seen everything differently—more clearly, more brightly.

Because of *her*.

So she wished to be kissed as though the world crumbled around them? Simon had always prided himself being a gentleman. But by Christ, what man would refuse a lady her desires? What man could resist being drawn into such a world?

He took another step closer until mere inches separated them again and she had to crane back her lovely neck to meet his eyes, exposing the soft flesh where her collarbones joined in the process.

His eyes dropped to her pulse, ticking against the pale slope of her arched neck and he let his tongue flick across his lower lip. Dipping his head until his lips were pressed softly against hers, he brought his finger to rest on her vein. Her breath was caught between his lips the same moment her pulse quickened beneath his finger, causing him to growl in approval.

When she leaned into him, it was all the invitation he needed. He deepened the kiss and slid his hand to caress the skin of her exposed leg. A gasp met his touch and his hand traveled up her leg until he cupped her buttocks. She groaned against his lips and he pressed his manhood against the flatness of her midriff while his tongue made love to her mouth, showing her just how much he wanted her.

In one swift motion, Simon lifted her up and gently laid her on the grass, half covering her with his body. He kneaded the soft swell of her breast as his tongue danced with hers, a sudden urgency driving him hard.

A harsh breath escaped him as she arched into him, a soft whimpering sigh leaving her. His hand dipped lower to her hip before it ventured to bunch her nightgown in his fists.

Somewhere in the back of his mind sanity returned, albeit on a thin thread. "Belle," he murmured against the hollow of her neck, before lifting his head to rest his forehead on hers. "Tell me to stop." Because he sure as hell would not break away from her on his own. He needed to hear her say the words.

Those beautiful all-knowing eyes flitted open, staring at him with such emotion, such trust, that he almost howled up at the moon. In answer, and to his complete astonishment, her hands wandered up to his chest and around the back of his neck before she pulled him down to her.

"Hell," he muttered before his lips crushed against hers again. His body demanded he feel her flesh against his. She wanted him, and he did not possess the strength to walk away from her. Not now, not when his body was aflame with desire. Never again would she say that his kiss lacked passion. And if this was the only chance he'd receive with her, then he'd damn well make it unforgettable.

He tore his mouth away from her, the hard evidence of his desire pressing up against her. "Belle, if we do not stop now, I won't be able to."

Her tongue darted out to taste the bare skin of his chest and he groaned. His resolve slipped. She seemed to know exactly what she wanted from him and he would not refuse her.

"I don't want you to stop," she murmured with her eyes still shut, "Simon."

At the soft purr of his name, his control broke, a possessive fire flaring to life inside of him. Simon was far past thinking clearly. Her fingers were stroking circles on his chest and it wreaked havoc with his senses. He studied the best way rid of her of the offensive material clinging to her body.

As if sensing his thoughts she gave a throaty chuckle and with a few tugs the garment fell open, exposing her ample breasts and the jagged the scar that marred her beautiful skin.

He inhaled sharply.

Oh, sweetheart.

Dipping his head, he ran soft kisses along the scar's ragged lines, cherishing her all the more for it. His head moved upward, to her breasts and he delighted in teasing her delicate buds. Damn, he would not be able to hold out much longer.

Within moments he rid himself of his breaches, still pleasuring her with his tongue. He nudged her knees apart with his and she answered by arching into him. He nearly spilled his seed at the contact.

He roamed the length of her body with his one hand, committing the feel of her skin to memory. Though he wanted nothing more to trail kisses all over her body, he did not dare, for he'd most certainly

embarrass himself.

His hand found her womanhood and Simon was satisfied at her whimper of pleasure as he inserted one finger into her.

“Saints, you’re so ready, sweetheart.”

With a swift motion, he replaced his finger with his throbbing manhood, probing at her entrance. Sweat formed on his brow. Unable to wait any longer, certain he would expire, Simon plunged into her with a single deep thrust, freezing when a whimper of pain reached his ears.

Simon froze, staring down at Belle in horror. It had been her whimper, her pain—at his intrusion of her body.

Her eyes flickered open, beautiful against her flushed skin.

Still, disbelief held him immobile.

“Why have you stopped?”

Why had he stopped?

Why had he stopped?

“Is something amiss?”

Yes, something was terribly amiss. “What the hell have you done?” he snapped.

Her brows drew together in confusion, which only served to further his ire.

“I would have thought it rather obvious,” she said with a dry voice, bringing to mind the first time he’d kissed her. He’d said those exact words to her.

“Damnation! You are a virgin!”

“*Was*, and should I have been something else?”

He blanched at the sudden suspicion in her tone. “That is not how I meant it.”

Her lips had parted in shock and Simon flinched. “You thought me unchaste.”

“That is *not* what I meant.” Wasn’t it? Why else had he been so surprised?

“Perhaps not what you meant, but certainly what you believed,” she snapped, struggling beneath him. “Get off of me, this instant!”

Simon glimpsed fury and disappointment flash across her eyes before humiliation finally settled in. His heart sank.

“Belle.”

“Do not ‘Belle’ me.” She pushed at him and this time, he relented, watching wearily as she tugged her nightgown with jerking movements into place.

“The way I see it, Simon, is that you thought my virtue had been disposed of, giving you the perfect opportunity to lay with me guilt free.”

“That is not true,” he growled. “It just happened so fast. I lost

control and...this should have been better for you—”

“That’s *your* fault.”

“Naturally, I will do the right thing by you.”

Belle held up a hand. “Please do not even say it. I will scream if you say it.”

His jaw clenched. “It is my duty.”

“Stuff your wretched duty! I will never marry the likes of you!”

“Belle...”

“And do not call me by my Christian name again. You have lost the privilege.” She scrambled from the ground and stood, glaring down at him. “Not another word on the matter. I have sorely misjudged you, but rest assured, I will not again.”

“We must talk about this, please.”

“There is nothing to talk about.” She inhaled a ragged breath before she twisted the knife, which he knew he deserved. “I cannot believe you’d think me so shallow. I’m not some harlot, falling into bed with any gentleman who knocks on my door.”

With quick jerking movements, he dressed, sending her a pleading look. “I have never thought you shallow...or of easy virtue. Please, let me make this right.”

“And how do you propose to do that?”

“This is not how a lady should walk away from her first time, especially because the man was a dim-witted fool. Let me make this right.”

“I doubt you can.”

Simon wanted to kick himself. Why did she not shout at him or pummel him with her fists? He’d take anything but this dejected response. He cursed his lack of foresight. Of course, she was a virgin. He just hadn’t wanted to give it much thought; afraid his honor would come in the way of sharing her bed.

He was such a bloody idiot.

He watched, as she, without another word, turned her back and stalked away from him toward the house, her spine rigid and her movements stiff.

“Dammit!” he cursed.

How the hell was he going to make this right?

It was impossible to tell the extent of the damage he’d done.

Yet he knew the world he’d known had been shattered tonight. He could no more let her go than he could stop breathing. With a heavy heart, he moved to follow her, if only to make sure she did not leave the house.

Somehow, he’d make it up to her, even if it took his entire lifetime to do so.

Chapter 9

The act of flirtation, Belle had come to learn, came much easier than the act of avoidance. Perhaps, she reflected on a sour note, because she was much better at one than the other. The act of avoidance, if one gave it some thought, required constant awareness, sneakiness and, at times, deviant forms of action. Flirtation on the other hand only required an easy smile, a wink of an eye and the soft sway of a hip.

Belle much preferred sticking to her strengths. Unfortunately, Westfield would not be ignored with her old enemy breathing his slimy breath down her neck.

“Double botheration,” she muttered as she poked at her breakfast.

She had lost her virtue in the garden at midnight with potential enemies lurking in the shadows. How utterly adventurous...if not for the unfortunate way the evening had ended.

The merging of two people in the act of intimacy inspired scandals, forbidden love and, in the past, even wars. Romantics wax poems of its carnal attachment, write songs of its dangers and declare mutiny in its name.

One would imagine that with such a reputation, the act itself would at least be pleasurable. Ugh. Her merging had only amounted to pain and horror. The horror being Westfield’s immediate grimace.

Should she not feel a touch of magic at the loss of something society held so high on a pedestal? But no. Belle did not feel any different. Perhaps it was not the act itself that had been disappointing, but Westfield’s priggishness. Neither Evelyn nor Jo had ever mentioned lovemaking to be lame. In fact, they enjoyed the act of love, even encouraged her to embark on an affair to experience it.

Perhaps that was the problem. She did not love Westfield, nor did

he love her. Nothing about it had been magical, well, except maybe for the prelude. The sensation of him inside of her, filling her, had been nice enough. Yet he'd believed her to be a woman of easy virtue.

Deuced devil.

The problem with this blasted century was not a political or religious one. No, it lay solely with the men and their belief that they had a right to everything. Heaven forbid they did not receive what they imagined is in their right to possess. They'd retire into a fit of pique.

The most disturbing part was that Belle had never before felt such fire in a kiss, nor such immediate spark at a single touch. He was able to bring forth such an intense fire in her, it had set her ablaze. But with the single thrust of his hip, he managed to extinguish the glorious flames.

Such a pity.

"Perhaps I should put it to the test," she muttered on an exhale as Charlemagne came trotting to her side. She patted the hound's head.

It was preposterous of course, but once the idea formed it would not be pushed aside. *What would the harm be in kissing another gentleman?* If for nothing other than confirming her suspicions, Belle could see no wrong in testing the possibility.

She smiled for the first time that morning, glancing down at her beloved dog. "At the very least, my little experiment will show Westfield just what I think of his sudden duty-bound declaration of marriage. It may even prove some distraction from this other ghastly business. What say you, Charlemagne?"

The greyhound licked her outstretched hand and Belle took that as an agreement.

"And I know just the gentleman to test my experiment on."

The deliciously handsome Earl of Craven.

The very same Craven they wagered Jo to entice a kiss from. He exuded power and was the embodiment of perfect male masculinity—handsome, virile, dangerous and with just the right amount of redeeming qualities to spark a lady's imagination. Indeed, he possessed the unerring ingredients to set a woman's blood on fire.

However, Craven was no fool. Luckily for her, he rarely passed up the opportunity to stir up some trouble.

With her plan in mind, Belle took a bite of her toast, pausing when she noted Charlemagne's eyes following her movements with bated expectation.

"Oh fine, here you go," she flicked her toast to the dog with a sigh. "You know, most hounds prefer rabbits, yet your favorite morning meal consists of buttered toast."

Gold was the chosen color of the night. It shimmered in the light of the myriad of candles that were lit all across the room, highlighting her honey blond hair, and bringing out the vivid hue of blue in her eyes. As usual, her bun was loosely pinned to the side of her head and her lips have been painted the color of cherry red. Quite unsurprisingly, she demanded the attention of every man she passed, rake and gentleman alike. But her priority was to find one man in particular and avoid another.

She'd also broken Westfield's rule to be escorted at all times, but to hell with the oaf and his stuffy rules. If De Roux wanted to finish what he'd started all those years ago, he'd have done so already. As it were, he enjoyed to sport with his victims first and until he made his move, Belle would not cower in fear.

No one even bothered to bat an eye at the fact that she'd arrived unescorted. Being a self-proclaimed spinster had its perks and while she'd always been able to catch the eye of gentlemen, they remained the distance at which she held them. All except Westfield, that was. And he could sink down to Hades as far as she was concerned.

She spied her prey leaning against the French doors across the ballroom, watching the happenings with a detached boredom and ignoring the giggling misses who stole glances at him.

Perfect.

Craven was a tall man, taller even than Westfield, darkly handsome, deliciously built and right where she required him. With purposeful gait, she waded through the crowd, smiling coyly at a gentleman here and there.

She noticed the exact moment Craven spotted her in the crowd and knew the second he realized she was heading straight his way. His lips turned upward in a small, yet tight, smile. Icy blue eyes that held nothing but suspicion stared back at her.

"Lady Belle," he murmured when she at last reached him. "You look exquisite this evening. The color compliments you."

"Craven, I see your charm has not dwindled with your age."

His lips spread into an amused smile. "You have a sassy mouth on you, my lady. I believe it gets you into trouble more often than not."

"Naturally."

She swept a glance over their audience, noting how the young giggling misses regarded her with avid interest. Probably waiting for the moment she burst into flames for daring to approach the likes of Craven.

He noticed her perusal, as well. "Please do not tell me you are dragging me to the dance floor. My feet could not bear it."

Belle snorted a laugh. More like his reputation. He was such an incorrigible rogue. Dangerous, too. That was why mamas steered their young away from him and gentlemen avoided him—he was the rake with an infamous reputation and dark wit. But to those few who were better acquainted with him, his company was, at times, rather enjoyable.

“Heavens no, what would people say? I only wished a reprieve from this stuffy ballroom when I spotted you. Your company is far more passable than that of another gentleman.”

He inclined his head, his eyes still watchful. “By all means Lady Belle, let us take a stroll in the gardens. It would hardly be gentlemanly of me to allow you to expire in such a beautiful gown.”

It was hardly gentlemanly of him to escort her for a stroll in the gardens, but Belle refrained from pointing it out. She did not desire for him to behave with honor.

Placing her hand on his offered arm, she allowed him to guide her through the doors, the wicked glint of mischief in his eyes infectious.

Belle waited for the shiver of awareness to ripple down her spine, as it always did with Westfield.

Nothing.

Yet.

“Dangerous men lurk in the shadows,” Belle murmured on a whisper, more to herself than to him, aware that once again she was venturing into the darkness where De Roux may yet lurk about. A whiff of doubt slivered into her mind, but she pushed it aside. Craven might be a rake, but he would not let any harm come to her. Of that she was certain.

“I take it there is a reason you sought me out, Lady Belle.”

Her gaze shot to his, but he was staring straight ahead. While his statement had been casual, Belle wasn’t fooled. Craven was no halfwit.

“I daresay you already have your suspicions.”

“The Earl of Westfield.”

Belle was impressed. She’d heard of his deduction capabilities, but never experienced it herself. Craven was as perceptive as he was handsome. “I am not attempting to make him seethe with jealousy if that had been your presumption.”

He nodded. “You are a beautiful lady, but you are independent. Now a gentleman has set his sights on you and you do not know what to do. Is that about correct?”

Too perceptive, Belle mused. “We should find you a wife, Craven. It is disturbing how much you know about everyone else.”

“I would not know what to do with one,” he confessed.

Belle chuckled. “I know a few things you could do.”

Craven joined in on her laughter. “You are a wicked woman,

indeed.”

They continued to stroll further into the gardens in silence, each drawing on their own thoughts. It seemed rather pointless to have imagined this little test of hers would have worked. It was clear, just by being in Craven’s presence, that he would not ignite the same passion as Westfield.

“I have a confession, my lord.”

He spared her a glance, one eyebrow raised. “I’m all ears.”

“I came to entice a kiss from you.”

That earned her a dark laugh. “I take it you have changed your mind?”

She nodded curtly. “A terrible idea.”

“And why is that?”

“I’ve clearly lost my marbles, even though the idea did seem promising at the time.”

He shook his head as if to disagree with her. “The idea, Lady Belle, should not have held any promise at all. I am not the sort of man that would have done the right thing by you should we have been caught. I would leave your reputation in shambles.”

If only Westfield exhibited such charm, Belle mused darkly.

“I am well aware of your type. But even if you were inclined to do the right thing, I assure you I most definitely would not. Indeed, sir, it is your reputation that would be ruined, not mine.”

A burst of laughter rumbled deep within his chest, earning him a surprised glance. Craven was not a man that laughed much, if ever, but amusement was ripe in his gaze.

He leaned closer until only inches separated their faces. “You are interesting as you are exquisite. I believe I like you, Lady Belle.”

Something fluttered in her chest.

Aha!

His gaze dropped to her lips. “And I’m beginning to think that perhaps a kiss might hold some promise after all.”

At the sharp intake of her breath, his lips twitched and then lightly touched hers, catching her exhale in a soft, feather-light kiss. Belle’s eyes fluttered closed as she waited for the inevitable deepening of the kiss and the tightening of her stomach muscles in response, but suddenly his lips disappeared from hers, their absence only followed by a muffled grunt.

When Simon first saw Belle disappear outside with Craven he’d stood frozen in shock, disbelief playing across his features. His disbelief had quickly transformed into a hot rage that burned inside his chest, and before he could stop himself, he was barrelling down their way, stone-faced and horns sprouting. Admittedly, it was rather out of character

for him.

Earlier, when a footman informed him that she'd decided to attend the Carleton Ball without so much as an escort, he'd nearly taken the poor man's head off in his fury. His anger was fueled by fear for her. Her avoidance only added to his already barely-contained aggression.

Dammit, he'd made a mess of things. So she refused to listen to his apologies, to allow him a chance to set it right. Fine. But venturing off on her when a killer was after her?

Unacceptable.

And what the hell was she doing with Craven? Simon had not forgotten how St. Aldwyn's wife had once tried to seduce the bastard. For Belle's sake, he hoped she wasn't plotting to get him back with such revenge.

So with the sole purpose of catching up with them in mind, he pushed through the crowd, ignoring anyone who called out his name or tried to gain his attention. He was in no mood to whip out his usual friendly charm.

Did the woman foster a death wish?

He burst through the French doors and out into the night with determined speed but paused on the terrace. There was no sign of Belle or Craven.

Something rattled in his chest. Fear for her, jealousy, all churned in his stomach as he ran into the garden at full speed. He was just about to shout out her name when laughter filtered through the dense shrubberies somewhere to his right. He stopped dead, his head whipping in the direction of the sound.

He recognized the low rumble of Craven's laughter instantly. Then, after a short bitter moment, he heard it—the soft resonance of Belle's tone as she too began to chuckle. Rage returned, swift and unrelenting, demanding retribution. His legs started to move, following the sound of their laughter until they came into view.

Craven's body was propelled forward, leaning into Belle, his face mere inches away from hers.

Simon had never been one to give into feelings of jealousy. It had just never been his way. Until tonight. Tonight the emotion spurred on his anger. Yes, he'd made a terrible mistake in believing her stripped of her innocence, but that did not mean that he should be punished for it this way.

When Craven suddenly lowered his head to place a kiss on Belle's lips, red filled his vision. Before he knew what was happening his feet had taken him forward with purposeful strides. His hands grabbed Craven by his coat and tossed the taller man aside, ready for the fight that would ensue. He wanted to pummel the bastard's face in.

"Simon! What are you doing?" Belle's indignant huff burned into his

skin, awakening the deeply buried primal beast in him. He ignored her, his eyes locked on Craven, ready for any retaliation.

Craven straightened his coat, but made no further move to retaliate. "It took you long enough," the man drawled, unconcerned that he'd just been tossed aside.

Belle gasped. "You knew all along he was here?"

Craven shrugged. "I saw him enter just before I guided you to the gardens. I figured he'd follow."

"Why would you take a stroll with me if you knew it would end in a fight?" Belle asked, her hands going to her hips.

"You were determined to lure me out into the shrubberies. Who am I to resist a beautiful lady?"

That caught Simon's attention. He stiffened. "What the devil were you thinking, Belle, seeking out trouble like this?"

Her gaze narrowed in on him. "I am not speaking to you. Craven can escort me back inside."

"The hell he will! You and I are overdue a talk, whether you wish to have one or not."

"It seems to me," Craven interjected, "that you two have much to discuss." And with that he melted into the shadows, a disturbing smile plastered on his lips as he left them alone in the garden.

Garden.

Memories of the previous night flooded back and Simon noted the blush forming on Belle's cheeks, indicating she remembered, as well. He wanted to demand an explanation, but she was still angry with him—and had every right to be. He, on the other hand, had no right but damnation, she could at least hear him out.

"I am not discussing what happened between us, you might as well save your breath."

Simon stiffened. "I made a mistake."

"Ah, so you feel guilty for believing me a whore. Well, rest assured the mistake was all mine."

"I never thought you a...*that*. And us being together wasn't a mistake. How I handled it was," he gritted out. "I want to do right by you, Belle."

She shook her head. "There is no future with me."

Simon studied her, her words sending tiny tremors of ice into his veins. In an attempt to gain control over his emotions, he pinched the bridge of his nose and inhaled deeply.

"What were you doing with Craven?" he asked after a moment, his voice a low murmur.

She angled her face away before glancing back at him, the unmistakable glint of confusion evident in her stormy eyes. "I wanted to see if I felt anything when he kissed me."

His heart hammered at her confession.

“And did you?”

“Of course. Craven is a handsome man.”

Simon’s heart hurt. “I do not believe you. You wanted to kiss Craven to see if he could awaken in you what I do, but he did not, did he?”

Silence met his statement and she glanced away.

“I thought as much,” he murmured.

“It does not matter, there still remains nothing to discuss.”

“Oh, it matters and there’s still a lot to discuss, but now is not the time. You might have forgotten all about the madman that wants you dead, but I have not.”

“That is beside the point.”

Simon raked a hand through his hair and exhaled a shaky breath. “I’ve been nothing but tolerant, but my patience is running thin. You cannot ignore what happened between us. You cannot ignore the fact that there is a man out there who would see you dead.”

“I will face everything, Simon, when I feel the time is right. Right now I choose to believe that the rat-headed-beast will not pounce on me with an ax, and you and I can discuss what happened another time.”

Simon wanted to argue, but the stubborn tilt of her chin had him deciding otherwise. It was best to pick his battles with care and even though his anger still ran hot, she looked ready to run him through with a sword.

“Fine.” He held out his arm. “We should return inside.”

As she re-entered the ballroom, neither noticed a figure stepping out from the shadows, watching them until they vanished from sight.

Chapter 10

As far as foolish plans went, theirs was as foolish as it got. What else would you call luring a dangerous and murderous spy out of the shadows with an inexperienced lady as bait? The presence of four men hiding throughout the docks, who were not entirely inexperienced but not spies either (at least not confirmed ones) should have reassured Belle, but her hands still shook. And in the midst of this danger hovered the knowledge of what she was yet to face.

Edgar De Roux.

In the flesh.

At least now she was strong, more brave, more determined. Not at all the young insipid miss he'd tricked years ago. That is what Belle told herself as she stood shivering in the cold.

As matter of fact, she stood only a few feet away from where the mongrel had left her for dead. It had seemed fitting to set up a meeting here, classical even. On the other hand, she hated this place. The smell brought memories to the surface that she'd rather forget altogether.

It was too dark to see whether there was still a stain imprinted into the ground, but she doubted there was. Time had a way of eroding shallow surfaces, deeming the details insignificant. Meaningless. But then, why should the earth stay scarred from her horror when it was carved forever into her being?

Which brought to mind the men's comical expressions when Belle confessed she may have remembered a way to get in touch with a spy that did not wish his whereabouts known. Their shocked faces still managed to make her lips twitch.

As it were, all she had to do was post an ad in the local paper, written in code, of course—exactly as Edgar had taught her how to do.

It had seemed fun, adventurous even, back then. How naïve she'd been!

There always existed the distinct possibility that he would not react to her ad or even watch out for it, but Belle knew better. He'd be expecting it. Only, they weren't the only players on the board this time. Somehow, she'd amassed valuable champions. Whether it was for the Crown or for her was irrelevant. She had guardians—something she did not have back then.

Of course, he may recognize this to be a trap. In fact, Belle had a terrible suspicion that he would. Why else meet him here, in such a secluded place, alone? She only hoped the four men were well hidden in their vantage points.

The plan, on the other hand, was quite simple. She would lure him out in the open. One of the men would take him out. In fact, there wasn't much to the plan other than that. Lure him out, take him out. The end. Belle did not much care for that plan. They could just as well miss him and hit her.

Faith, Belle. Have a little faith.

She once again glanced at the spot where she'd lain in unspeakable pain. That was about all she recalled from that night—the pain. Not even her cousins knew about what happened. Not even her brothers. And while she remained saddened by their abandonment, she did not hold it against them.

The soft thud of footsteps hitting the ground alerted her to someone approaching.

Her spine stiffened. Swiveling her head to the left, Belle's breath caught as she watched Edgar emerge from the darkness like an avenging angel.

Fear clogged her throat.

Did he have to be so beautiful? No murderous spy should look so good while being so bad.

Where was James?

Why did he not act?

Did they wish for the despicable man to throw her over his shoulder before they intervened?

A low, soft chuckle reached her ears and memories assailed her at the sound. His lips pressing against hers. Promises of love. Anger. Pain. Betrayal.

He halted a few feet away, his eyes roaming over her with malice and something else. He took in the slight twitch of her hand, her rigid stance and the determined set of her jaw. This was a man she'd thought she loved once. Now, only a scar remained, forever reminding her of him.

She returned his stare, her eyes noting his calm demeanor, casual

stance and the triumphant glint in his eyes. He seemed unconcerned that this might be a trap.

Their eyes locked.

"I'm surprised *ma belle*, that you would choose this particular spot to meet."

She cringed at the endearment.

My beauty.

"It seemed fitting, do you not agree?"

And you could never resist coming back to this spot.

He tilted his head to the side as he regarded her. "Foolish, I would think."

Belle managed a shrug. "If you wanted me dead, I would be. So why am I not?"

His smile was a crooked cruel line. "Oh, *ma belle*, you have changed since I last saw you, transformed from a duckling to a swan, a surprising challenge. I could not just kill you and be done with it. I will enjoy every moment of your torture."

Her mask slipped. "I'm still in possession of you stolen documents."

His laugh was a harsh cackle. "They are no good to me. I want you."

Panic rose. It should not have come as a surprise, but it did. She had only entertained this idea in her deepest nightmares. Now the truth stared at her. He was here for her and her, alone.

But why?

"How did you learn of my survival?"

"You forget, my dear, I knew you quite well once upon a time. You shared with me your deepest dreams. So when a particular brand of gowns started to emerge across Europe, I recognized your hand in it."

Belle was speechless. "But that's impossible."

"Hardly, if you recall the pathetic chatterbox you were back then. I do prefer this new version of you much better, *ma belle*."

Ignoring the insult, she snapped, "Not that. I'm only surprised my gowns are so widely spread. I only cater to clients in England."

He blinked, as though he could not phantom her line of thought. "Did you believe no one would copy your designs?"

"I never gave it much thought, honestly."

Edgar blinked and then shook his head. "This is not a fucking tea party where we exchange pleasantries. You ruined me and I have come for my revenge."

To Belle's horror, laughter echoed through the night. *Her* laughter. But truly—*I have come for my revenge?* Surely an almighty spy could do better.

"What is so damn funny?"

"My apologies," Belle shook her head, "Nothing, only you have not changed one bit. You're still the deplorable, wretched and cruel

bastard you were back then. Pitiful, I must admit.”

“Careful, *ma belle*,” he snarled. “I do not suffer insults gladly.”

She started to retreat, one small step at a time. A signal to the others she wanted out. Edgar advanced on her, noting her retreat.

James! Take him out, drat it!

They had the perfect shot. Why weren’t any of them shooting?

His lips turned upward in a snarl. “Did you believe I would not know this was a trap? That I am not one step ahead of you?”

Her heart accelerated.

Satisfaction glittered in his eyes.

What had he done to the others? Evelyn was out there too, defiant as always. If any harm befell her...

He seemed to read her mind. “I must commend you, Lady Belle. You have quite the friends, but they still won’t be able to save you, my men are keeping them occupied. Oh, and I would cover my ears if I were you.”

His warning came too late. Blasts sounded all around them as deafening explosions filled the air. A scream tore from her throat as Edgar tackled her to the ground, rolling with her off the side of the dock, slamming her into a hard surface.

A boat?

No.

She tried to shout for help, but his hand clamped over her mouth. She bit his hand, hard. A string of vile curses sputtered over her head and the next moment he slammed his fist into her jaw. Black spots dotted over her vision and Belle succumbed almost instantly to the darkness, not fighting its pull. Darkness was , better than terror after all.

Awareness returned slowly, reluctantly, and Belle had no clue how long she’d been out. Hours? Days? It was hard to tell. She lay on a cold, hard surface, her jaw throbbing and her muscles an aching mess. She sensed rather than saw she was not alone. Someone was in the room with her. De Roux? One of his minions?

Her lids fluttered open.

It was too much to hope for a knight in shining armor, she supposed. Instead, Mr. Foul Breath stood leaning against the wall in the far corner of the room, lost in thought. He stirred when he noticed she had awakened, regarding her with an easy smile.

Belle wasn’t fooled.

“I had hoped to have more time with you, to truly enjoy your suffering, but you made that impossible when you forced me to knock you out.”

Belle did not move, her gaze watchful and alert. A quick glance at

her surroundings confirmed they were on a ship. Well, at least that explained her sudden nausea.

She also noticed she'd been stripped down to her chemise and stockings. Her dress was nowhere to be seen. For once she was grateful she'd worn a thicker, more conservative chemise and not one of her own seductive creations.

A flicker of true unease shuddered through her. What need would he have to remove her clothing? But she'd be damned if she called attention to it.

"Where are you taking me?" A hoarse croak revealed itself as her voice, foreign even to her own ears.

He hunched down, a mocking smile playing across his sinfully handsome face. "Not far. The deep blue ocean, if you will."

"Why?"

"I cannot ruin the surprise now, can I? Better for you to see my grand plan for yourself."

Bile rose, but Belle did her best to remain calm. It would do her no good to panic. Not if she wished to survive. How long ago had they set sail? How far away were the others?

"Why would you do this to me?"

"You ruined me, now I will destroy you."

"I shot you and yet you live, that hardly constitutes ruin."

"But it's never that simple, is it?" He glanced at his pocket watch before his gaze flicked back to her. "Time is up, princess. Your friends will be upon us soon and I cannot risk them catching this vessel."

"Wait," she croaked as he hauled her to her feet. "Have you not destroyed enough of me?" Damn her words for sounding so pitiful, but she'd do anything to spare her some time.

"Not nearly as much as you destroyed me."

And with that, he snatched her by the arm and dragged her from the room. She was powerless to stop him, but by the saints, she would not let death take her without a fight.

He led her through a narrow corridor and up a short flight of stairs to the deck.

A few sailors milled about, though not nearly enough to man a ship this size. Some of them had vicious scars marring their faces and arms, some had black designs on their necks, but they all smelled if they were in need of a bath and they all looked as cruel as her captor.

De Roux pushed her into the arms of a short, fat man whose smile revealed his yellow, rotting teeth.

"There, there beautiful, I've got ye."

Belle pushed at his flabby chest, but his arms caged her in like an iron bar.

"Let me go at once! What are planning to do with me?"

They all laughed.

“You haven’t told her, captain?”

Belle stilled. She recognized that voice.

A man stepped out from the shadows. She could not place him, not until a pouch full of coins landed at her feet. *Her* pouch.

“You!” she accused.

“Aye, me.

De Roux chuckled. “Ah yes, you have met George, I believe. What was it you said? ‘It’s hard to imagine one can put a price on someone’s life, yet, to me his life is not worth a penny.’ Those were the words, George?”

“Aye, captain, word for word.”

Belle struggled against her hold. “You are vile,” she snapped at the both of them.

“Perhaps it’s time to tell her captain,” George said, his smile a nasty delight.

Tell her what?

“I was saving the best for last.”

The rotten beast started to drag her to the side of the ship.

“Lower the plank!” Edgar demanded.

Plank?

And then it hit her.

“Ah yes, what do you think, *ma belle*? I know. It’s a bit archaic, but your friends have given chase, not leaving me much choice. But, look at it this way, my dear, sweet, Belle, by walking the plank, we are giving them a grand show.” He glanced at his men as they put good work in readying the tool of her demise. “Now let us see whether they can save you, shall we?”

“You are despicable!” she spat, the instinct to survive sharp in her mind. She’d learned to swim as a child. If she could hold out long enough, her friends may get to her in time.

She dragged her feet as she was pushed toward the plank, her onlookers cheering in glee. De Roux stood silent, watching every nuance of her expression. She schooled her expression, refusing to show fear.

“I admire the woman you’ve become, my sweet,” he drawled. “It seems such a waste to kill you, but admiration does not wipe out hatred.”

“Go to hell!”

She was pushed from behind as soon as the words left her lips and her knees hit the ground with a painful thud.

“Mind ye language, lass. That is the captain you’re speaking to.”

Belle grunted, lifting herself to her feet again. She shot Rotten Teeth a glare.

He motioned her toward the plank.

With an exaggerated sigh, she shut her eyes in an attempt to gather all her strength. Another push brought Belle back to her surroundings. She took a step forward, her gaze lifting to the sky. No stars could be seen tonight, no moon.

Another step.

The sloshing sound of water hitting the ship's side should have caused her panic, but instead, it served to calm her frayed nerves. The ship was alight with fire sticks, but the waters were dark. Even if her friends did manage to catch up with her, how would they find her?

Rough fingers grabbed her waist and lifted her to the plank, shoving her further onto it.

Belle gasped as she almost fell forward, but managed to righten herself.

A pistol cocked behind her.

Fabulous.

She shot De Roux a glare of her shoulder. "Is that truly necessary?"

He shrugged. "You are as slippery as an eel, my dear. Just a precaution, nothing more."

Precaution, her backside. It would be just like him to shoot her in the back once she reached the edge of the plank. She'd not give him the pleasure.

A glance into the black abyss showed a small, flickering light in the distance. A flicker of hope. As long as he did not shoot her in the back, or anywhere else on her person, and as long as she managed to stay afloat until her friends arrived, she may yet survive.

The cheers had grown boisterous by now and Belle took another step forward, bringing her to the middle of the plank. She may die yet, but Belle would be damned if she did not get the last say.

Glancing over her shoulder at De Roux, her lips stretched into a wide smile. "Until we meet again," she said just before she threw herself off the plank, plunging into the ice-cold ocean.

On the ship, everyone fell silent as De Roux's roar of fury echoed through the night.

It was hard not to surface the moment the coldness stung her skin but instead, Belle dove deeper, swimming away from the ship.

Popping noises, reached her ear, and Belle could only imagine them shooting into the ocean, but she did not plan to be shark bait tonight.

Belle finally started to push herself to the surface, her limbs exhausted and numb from the cold. When she broke through the water, the night air was not as chill as the sea.

Gasping for breath, she tread water. "Oh you're in a bind now, Belle," she muttered as she glanced up at the ship. She could hear that unoriginal and pathetic villain shouting obscenities over the side.

Good.

She noted with satisfaction she'd surface far enough for them not to spot her in the dark waters, not that it mattered. They'd have to make a quick escape if they wished to be gone by the time her friends arrived.

Their ship was still a small flickering light in the distance. Belle was no seafarer, so it was hard to tell how far away they were. There was nothing to do but float in their direction until they reached her. Floating would conserve her energy at least.

However, it proved easier said than done. All too soon the numbness receded, replaced by tiny prickles of cold, stabbing at her skin. Her teeth clattered together and the energy she spent to fight away the cold was almost painful. Already her legs were sinking, refusing to stay afloat.

Damn that pox-riddled man.

If she died tonight, she would haunt that slimy weasel. Yes, she'd command her soul to go straight to him or...*Simon.*

But no, she was still mad at him for his insufferable maleness. Wasn't she?

She'd kept so many secrets from her friends, so many things left unsaid. It bothered her. She wasn't prepared to die. Not yet.

Nonetheless, she occupied her mind by imagining all the ways she would haunt her cursed enemy. She'd haunt in right into Bedlam, and she would haunt him there still. She'd haunt him for all the ways in which he haunted her. He'd unrepentantly sliced into her womb, the cruel bastard. It was his doing that she would never bear children. That she'd always feel pain where her scar was carved into her skin. That she'd always be damaged. And that she'd always remember her mistake.

That was, perhaps, the biggest burden of them all.

Every time she saw a child playing in the park, she remembered the reason why she could never have a family. Every time she felt pain, she remembered the reason she hurt.

Ah yes, her death will be bittersweet indeed.

"I hope you are ready for me, you bastard, I *will* haunt your vile hide straight into perdition."

The dark, merciless ocean pulled at her.

But even after all she'd been through, she did not regret any of it. Not even her lackluster night with Simon.

Her clattering mouth attempted to smile as she recalled his shocked expression at taking her virtue. Sure, she'd been furious, but looking back now, it was rather comical.

She'd have to haunt him for that and for the hope he'd snuck into her chest, the hope that made it possible to dream of dreams she'd

long since forgotten about—dreams of passion, and, perhaps, of love.

It seemed, however, that fate still favored irony above all. She had cheated death once, and fate, apparently, was not about to allow her to cheat it again.

Belle started to cough, swallowing water. Her eyes burned and it was becoming such a task to breathe. It was so cold. Every part of her hurt so much.

She'd done her best, saved all her strength for this. But she started to sink then; the ocean swallowing her into its dark depths. She felt one last thought bubble up before her face submerged under the water.

Hope was a damnable thing.

Chapter 11

Simon found it difficult to breathe. Bile rose in the back of his throat. They had failed. De Roux had taken Belle and he'd do unspeakable things to her—was likely already doing those things. The images his mind conjured terrified him, numbed him. Somewhere, deep in the back of his awareness, a voice admonished him that it was not the time to dwell on such things, that he had to stay strong and find her. No matter what.

“Simon, we will find her.”

His expression blank, Simon stared at his sister.

They had all failed her; she had believed herself safe under their protection. She'd placed so much trust in these pair of brothers, so much trust in them all.

Simon looked away way from them, not able to stomach their presence. He wanted to lash out at someone, but the blame did not only lay with Shaw. He should have fought harder against them. The plan had not been solid enough. They'd not taken into account that De Roux might retaliate so swiftly, that he might find a way to avert the trap. All of them were at fault. The bastard had been one step ahead of them since the start.

Simon leaned against the nearest building when nausea overtook him. In short order, he cast up his accounts. A gentle hand attempted to comfort him, patting his back. By nature, he wasn't a mean person, but he *would* make it his personal mission to destroy Derek Shaw's life if they did not find Belle in time.

The sound of hooves drawing closer drew his focus away from his churning stomach and to an approaching rider. His released a stifling groan.

Grey stopped a few paces away.

He took in Simon, crouched against the wall, probably deathly pale and Shaw standing guard before his steely gaze landed on his wife's tear-streaked face.

Simon watched his Grey's mouth pressed into a hard line before he jumped from his horse. Of course, Grey had forbidden Evelyn to get involved.

Grey walked over to Simon. "We will get her back," he murmured, then cast a murderous glance Shaw's way. "Won't we, Shaw?"

Derek nodded.

"Get St. Aldwyn," Grey ordered.

"There is no time for this," Derek bit out. "We must find my brother; he followed them."

"And St. Aldwyn is the only one who can snap Westfield out of his shock," Grey snapped back.

Still hunched over, Simon rather took offense to that, but perhaps Grey had a point. After all, why wasn't he speaking? It was as if his tongue had seized all movement.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Shaw hesitate, and in that moment, lucidity reigned. Simon turned a murderous glare on Derek Shaw. "I told you not to involve her. If anything happens to her, I will skin you."

Derek only nodded, his eyes grim. "If Lady Belle dies, I will let you." Then he turned and left, taking Grey's horse.

A few minutes later a carriage rolled up and Grey directed Evelyn toward it, depositing her inside before he came back for Simon, who followed him on numb limbs.

"Matthew," his sister started to stay to Grey.

"I told you not to get involved; it's too dangerous," Grey's soft voice, harsh with emotion, made Simon happy *he* wasn't married to Grey.

"Belle is my best friend."

Belle. Was she even still alive?

Grey's foul curse snapped Simon's head up. He cast a frown at his friend.

"You are carrying my child, Evelyn. I cannot believe you'd endanger him or her."

"I am not!"

Simon's ears perked up, though his thoughts were still lost in misery. Trust his sister not to realize she was with child.

"Yes, Evelyn, you are. Your body has started to round and you're devouring everything in sight. That is what happens when you are expecting."

Evelyn's mouth formed a silent "O" and she glanced down at her figure, patting at her middle before groping her own breasts, no doubt trying to feel the roundness her husband was referring to.

Simon groaned. "Please do not do that in my presence."

She shot him an apologizing stare. "I do not feel any different, and I haven't been sick. You are supposed to become sick, right?"

"Perhaps you are lucky in that regard," Grey said with a sigh, no doubt exasperated by his wife at this point.

"Congratulations, sis," Simon murmured, managing a slight smile. "Soon you will be casting up your accounts, as well."

"Ugh. I can only hope I will do so with more style."

Simon did not laugh at her attempt to lighten the mood. Instead, he looked away. He still clutched at his stomach as it started to churn once more.

He was supposed to protect Belle, and now she was gone. She could be screaming in pain. Or bleeding to death, counting on them to save her and they sat in a damn carriage, exchanging heated looks.

How long had it been since she disappeared? An hour? Two? One moment she stood there, talking with the man who'd hurt her, and in the next moment, two men dashed from the shadows, drawing their attention away for but a moment before the dynamite exploded and she'd vanished.

He couldn't breathe. Choking noises tore from his throat.

Simon shot out the door, hitting the side of the road with a painful thud, heaving. His sister's cry of alarm came from a distance, as Grey's command for her to leave him enough room to breathe. Terrible noises started emerging from his throat. Were they moans or keens? He wasn't even sure. Then he heard it. *Belle, belle, belle*. He was chanting her name like a prayer or like she was already dead.

Hard hands gripped his shoulders, hauling him upright.

Those hard hands then gripped his face.

St. Aldwyn.

"Saints brother, you are a sight for sore eyes. And ears."

"Sod off."

St. Aldwyn cursed. "Listen, we will find Lady Belle, and when we do we will string that son of a bitch from his limbs. But first, you must get a grip on yourself. Even if I have to tear England apart, we will find her, because I'd rather not have my wife declare war on France, and she would do that before she gave up on finding her friend."

Simon rather thought she'd do it, too. The only reason she wasn't here clad with armor was she'd sprained an ankle earlier that day and hobbling about in the dark seemed foolish.

He gave a single nod, fighting to take control back from his body and mind. Not an easy task, but he managed to find renewed strength the moment his determination to save Belle outweighed his fear.

He glanced at his brother-in-law. "You should take Evelyn home. We will start to track Belle and find the others."

"I am not going anywhere. Belle is my friend, I will not abandon her," Evelyn replied, her jaw set.

"This is no place for a woman with child! You will do as you're told," Simon barked, sending her a stern look.

St. Aldwyn's gaze dropped to her middle, a low whistle leaving his lips, while he shook his head disapprovingly.

Grey shot them the briefest of grateful looks before leading his wife back to the safety of the carriage.

"We must stop anyone who may have seen her," Simon said as he watched the carriage depart with hardened eyes before he turned to St. Aldwyn.

His friend nodded. "James saw her being tackled and rolled off the dock and into a boat. He followed, I do not know how, but I was tasked with informing the captain of the *Mary Jane* that we will be making a hasty departure. They are waiting for us now."

Simon felt his gut clench at the thought of Belle on a ship, bound for Christ knows where. The thought of her gone, forever from this world, his life, was incomprehensible, inconceivable and utterly devastating. He would not allow it to happen. It could not happen.

They took off at a run. The anchored ship was not far. Simon refrained from asking questions, like who the hell was this captain and what his connection to James Shaw was. None of that mattered. The only thing that mattered was that they possessed the means to save Belle.

On deck, men were running around and shouting orders. Derek Shaw was at the helm, James Shaw nowhere in sight. A few minutes later, they were on their way and heading out to open sea.

"Do not worry, old friend, she's as tough as nails, if you recall."

That she was. "They have a good head start on us."

St. Aldwyn nodded. "True, but *The Mary Jane* here is the lighter, smaller and quicker if the captain's boasting is to be believed."

Simon did not reply, his gaze roaming the dark abyss staring back at him.

"Here," St. Aldwyn murmured, placing a flask in his hand. "Drink that."

He studied the flask; the St. Aldwyn crest was engraved in the center. "Did someone steal your bourbon that you would engrave your family name onto it?"

His friend shrugged. "It's never been taken again."

With a chuckle, Simon swallowed a good measure of the stuff, the liquid burning down his throat. Never had he wanted to punch a Shaw as much as he did then.

A small flickering light in the distance brought his attention back to the ocean. How much time had passed? Moments later, shouts rang

and cheers went up, but Simon and St. Aldwyn did not share their joy. Finding the ship was not enough. They needed to recover Belle.

Fifteen minutes later, the flickering light drew closer as they advanced on the much bigger ship. A grim-faced Derek appeared with a telescope in hand, "Lady Belle appears unharmed."

"Contrary to some misguided beliefs, starting with the better news does not make the terrible any easier. Spit it out," St. Aldwyn barked.

Simon shot his friend a warning look. His heart drummed in his chest and a sick feeling of dread overcame his heart. St. Aldwyn did have a point.

Derek handed Simon the telescope. "We will reach them in an hour, but they are making her walk the plank now."

They'd never get to her in time.

St. Aldwyn cursed and Simon's fists itched to strangle that French bastard. He took the telescope, adjusting it so that the deck of the other ship came in focus. The ship was alight with candles and torches, as though the bastards wanted them to watch.

She spotted Belle on the deck, in nothing but her shift, a big-bellied crewmember keeping her captive. Fury rose, swift and fierce.

"Bloody hell."

Simon glanced away just long enough to note St. Aldwyn had been given a telescope, too.

"Lady Belle is a strong swimmer. We will get to her in time if she acts smart," Shaw said.

"Oh? And you know this how?" Simon snapped, but he recalled her lithe body, bathed in the moonlight.

No answer came, which was just as well since a commotion on the other ship's deck held all his attention. They were urging her onto the plank, one man even putting his dirty hands on her person to deposit her on the wooden structure.

It was too far to discern her expression, but not too far to note her moving forward. "Dammit Belle, stall!"

"He has a pistol aimed at her."

Simon stilled, inching the telescope to focus on the deck to see that De Roux indeed had a pistol trained on her.

"He doesn't want to take the chance that we'd save her in time."

Simon swung to refocus on Belle only to see her pause and glance over her shoulder before she jumped off the plank.

"Shit!" Simon nearly fell to his knees right then. But he still kept a steady hand on the telescope, focusing on the spot he'd last seen her vanish into the water.

"Steady," St. Aldwyn urged. "It is a good thing she jumped. She's smart in refusing them the opportunity to shoot her. We will save her."

“How the hell will we know where she is?”

“Trust the captain. Trust Lady Belle.”

Much easier said than done, Simon reflected bitterly.

He did not know how long he stood there staring through the lens and searching the black waters for Belle, but the sudden shouts jerked his attention back to the activities on deck.

“In the water up ahead!” Someone shouted and Simon jerked in the direction the outstretched arms pointed. He leveled his telescope to the spot and within a few seconds saw dark blond hair standing out in the harsh darkness of the water.

He did not act; he did not think. He only reacted.

St. Alwyn shouted, attempting to stop him, but it was too late.

Simon had jumped ship.

Chapter 12

Belle awoke with a terrible pain pounding against her skull. Her mouth was dry and her body ached all over. What on earth had she done? Gotten into her brother's brandy supply? No, that wasn't it. Was she ill? No, not it either. Her throat burned when she swallowed and her chest hurt when she breathed.

Then it flooded back to her.

Explosions.

Edgar.

The plank.

The ocean.

Memories of the previous night filtered through her fog-filled brain. She recalled acting as bait to lure out the man that once tried to kill her. But he'd bested them, knocked her out and she'd awoken on a ship.

This time when Belle lifted her lashes, she was greeted by an empty room that smelled of flowers. Heaven, perhaps? It certainly smelled as though it might be. But her mind rejected the possibility. She was in too much pain to be dead.

Her eyes flickered to the door, then to the armoire, not recognizing the room. Had she been saved? Or was this another trick of Edgar's, meant to lull her into a false sense of security?

By all accounts she should be dead, so it was hard to imagine that monster of a man not lurking just outside the door, his thin lips pulled into a cruel smile.

Against her will, her eyes started to drift closed, even though she tried to fight against the exhaustion. Darkness prevailed once again, plunging her into a dreamless sleep.

When she next woke, the soft murmur of voices reached her ears.

She recognized Jo's and Evelyn's among them. Her eyes fluttered open and she saw the familiar faces of her friends. She watched them as they stood huddled together, speaking in hushed tones.

Evelyn was the first to notice she had awakened. "Belle! We are so glad you're all right. I was worried you might never wake up."

That caused her to frown. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Two days," Jo answered. "I nearly took Damien's head off for letting you get captured. You almost died. Again."

Belle tried to remember how she'd been saved, but there were only black spots where her memory should be.

"How?"

"Simon saved you," Evelyn answered with a proud smile. "He dove into churning seas and pulled you out."

Jo rolled her eyes. "Of course that is the version you prefer," she came over to take Belle's hand. "He did do all that, but it was James that initially saved you from drowning."

"James?"

Jo nodded. "He followed you and snuck onto the ship. You were never alone, though it took a while to find you once you jumped from the plank but he followed, jumping after you with a piece of driftwood. That was very brave, what you did."

"That man's resources know no bounds," Evelyn muttered.

"Well, he is a Shaw," Jo pointed out.

"He will be looking for me."

Her friends' worried eyes met hers. "And this time we will be ready," Jo declared.

Belle swept the room with a curious glance. "I'm not at home."

"No, I ordered the driver to take you straight to our residence, since it was closer," Jo replied.

Belle nodded. "Is he all right?"

"Simon?" Evelyn nodded. "Oh, he's fine. He collapsed from tripping over his own feet with you in his arms, but swears it was from the water consumption." Evelyn smiled, choking back a laugh.

Jo snorted. "I heard he cast up his entire stomach and wept like a babe when you were taken."

"Oh posh, he did not weep, but he did lament around for a bit," Evelyn admitted.

"And of course he'd blame the water. Falling over his own feet must be a horrifying prospect for him," Jo said with a huff.

He'd been sick?

Belle's heart sped up like a race horse at the thought of Simon suffering because of her. He'd dived into churning waters for her. The revelation combined with her responding concern for him shook her to the core.

"I dreamed he read to me," Belle murmured, recalling soft murmurings of his voice.

"Oh, that was no dream. He read to you for hours from a book about gardens. We got so tired of hearing about shrubberies, we chased him away to get some sleep," Evelyn murmured.

"And get a reprieve for our ears," Jo complained.

Belle's lips twitched. It would seem he was still attempting to make up for his blunder.

"I should thank him then, for saving me. And James, too, of course."

"I daresay you will not be able to live it down. Men are pesky beasts," Jo offered.

Belle groaned. "Yes, well, Westfield never wanted me to act as bait, so there is no escaping that arrogant complaint."

His notion that a woman should remain sheltered and protected against the outside world had already been teeth grinding, she could only imagine what it would be like now. It would be impossible to live with him. He would hound her every step. Already her mind raced with ways to prevent that from happening.

Perhaps she should just stay here with Jo, although that would not stop him from staying, as well, with St. Aldwyn being his closest friend and all. She could always inform her servants to lock him out of her home, but that wouldn't stop him from bribing them. It was quite astonishing what that man could accomplish and get away with. Not to mention distracting.

"I take it they did not manage to catch him?"

Belle did not need to say who she referred to.

Evelyn shook her head; regret reflected her bright blue eyes. "By the time the men fished you out of the ocean, he'd already put too much distance between the ships."

Belle shuddered at the thought what might have happened if they hadn't managed to catch up.

"You will all be in danger now."

"Hush, we were all aware of the dangers from the beginning." Josephine exchanged a glance with Evelyn.

Belle's heart sank. "What is it?"

"Well," Evelyn murmured, taking a seat on the side of the bed. "Grey is ushering me to the country. I'm so sorry, Belle. I wanted to stay, but it appears I am with child."

Belle pulled her friend in for a hug, kissing her on the forehead. "I'm so happy for you! And I get to be an aunt."

"You're not mad?"

"Of course not! You must think of your family—your child. Grey is in the right this time. He *should* drag you to the country."

A light knock on the door drew their attention and Simon poked his

head through the opening. His eyes found Belle instantly, examining every little line of her before he turned his gaze to his sister. "Your husband awaits you, sis."

Evelyn glanced back to Belle and murmured her goodbyes, tears in her eyes. "I'll be back soon."

Belle nodded, her throat tight with emotion as she watched her friend take her leave. She would miss Evelyn but was glad she would be safe from any further danger. De Roux had proved a formidable opponent before, now he appeared even more ruthless. How did one beat a man who possessed no remorse and was merciless in his villainous exploits?

Belle was jostled out of her musings when Simon sat down on the side of the bed. Belle noted with dismay that Josephine had disappeared along with Evelyn.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper.

Belle studied him through narrowed regard. There were dark smudges beneath his eyes and his normally impeccable hair was a tangled mess. Even the ever-present sparkle in his eyes had all but vanished. Belle sensed that beneath his veneer of calm, there laid a barely restrained fury, a murderous intent even, though he did good work hiding it.

A heavy sigh heaved from her chest. Now this was a side to him she'd never before seen, a side she was quite certain he rarely, if ever, presented to the world.

"Thank you, Simon, for saving me."

His cheeks reddened. "Anyone would have done the same."

Belle shook her head, amazed that he could not see the greatness of his act. "No, not everyone would have."

"It was my fault you were taken."

Belle frowned. "What utter rot. That villain bettered us. You cannot lay the blame at your feet."

"I should have fought harder against the plan."

She snorted. "You still would have been outnumbered."

He looked away. "I thought I was too late; we were too late."

"I was lucky, but De Roux needs to be dealt with. Are there any leads?"

Simon shook his head. "Shaw attempted set chase but the devil managed to give him the slip. I'm afraid we have nothing. They've set up patrol units along the coast in the event he returns."

"Oh, he will return, even if just to ascertain himself that I am dead."

"Then we will catch him, even if I have to turn this entire island upside down."

Belle blinked at the menace in his voice but found she felt the same darkness churning inside of her. She wanted Edgar De Roux dead.

"I wish to go home," she murmured.

"No, that is not an option. If he returns, it will be the first place he searches. It's better for you to stay here, at least for a while."

"My aunt—"

"We will take care of your aunt. Do not concern yourself with such things now."

Belle grabbed his arm in a tight grip. "I did not ask for permission, Simon. I am going home."

His eyes narrowed and he leaned into her until their noses almost touched. "You are the most infuriating woman I've ever had the fortune to meet," he growled.

"You can act the indignant male all you like, but I still make my own decisions. I do not plan on hiding like some scared little bird. I won't."

"Dammit! You don't even give me an inch."

"Simon, don't. Please."

"We made love, Belle. You cannot tell me that it meant nothing to you."

"That horrendous act—"

"Horrendous act?" Simon cut her off, a look of horror flashing across his features.

"Well, it was hardly an act of wonder with you hovering above me all shocked like."

"I made a mistake," he bit out, "which I thoroughly regret. That still doesn't change what happened or the fact that I wish to make it right by you."

"You should," she snapped. "However, I have made my feelings on marriage clear."

Anger flashed in his gaze, but she held her ground. He did not know the devastating truth.

"We can work through your reservations."

The words cut Belle deeply, but she dared not give him false hope. If she allowed even an inch of weakness or doubt to the surface, he would break down her defenses with ease. She would not risk it, being content to just live in a world where he existed.

He said nothing, only stared her through tired eyes. She hated seeing him so desolate. "Perhaps, once this is over, I will tell you of all my reasons and you will understand the merit they carry," Belle offered.

He stilled at her words and Belle watched as his mind calculated all the possibilities and their meaning.

"I will take you home," he said and paused. When he continued his voice was so slow, so ominous, that Belle's heart started to race. "But this time I will not be sleeping in your brother's chambers. I'm not

prepared to let you out of my sight for even a moment until that bastard is apprehended.”

Her breath hitched at the thought. He meant to stay in the same room as her this time. The concept of how close of a proximity that meant overwhelmed her. She would hear every movement of his body, every inhalation of breath.

Torture.

But she'd take it.

“Very well, as I have no desire to be left alone after what happened. But it does not mean that you are allowed to take any liberties with me, sir.”

His eyes widened in mock disbelief. “I would never take advantage of a lady who has just survived a traumatic experience.”

Belle only snorted in response. Her heavy eyelids began to drift shut again, having decided that was enough energy spent for now. She murmured a retort as she fell into sleep, “I do believe you speak untruths, but I'm confident in my ability to hold your advances at bay.”

Simon watched Belle's eyes turn heavy in her battle to stay awake. Moments later, she lost, and her breathing steadied. He inhaled a shaky breath, which surprised him. He'd not even realized he'd been holding his in.

Her placating admission that they'd talk once the danger was over had set his already heavy heart over the edge and into the abyss. He suspected she would break all alliance then.

Dammit!

He'd have to come up with a plan to tie her to him irrecoverably *before* the threat was gone—something that would convince her to change her mind on marriage. For now, he was glad he had an excuse to remain plastered at her side. But how long would “now” last?

He simply refused to lose her.

St. Aldwyn poked his head through the door, drawing Simon from his troubled reflections. “Oh, you're both decent.”

The man's voice had held the unmistakable tinge of disappointment.

Simon's lips curled into a small smile. “She's damn stubborn and suffered enough,” Simon replied quietly.

He waved Simon's comment away. “I take it her mood has not improved where you are concerned?”

“Her mood has nothing to do with me, it's her stubbornness that refuses to improve.”

Simon shook his head. “I can feel that I've reached the end of my rope—the end of my good behavior. I'm afraid I'll do something... ungentlemanly if she doesn't change her mind soon. Like, set my mind

to seducing her.”

“You will not let her go then?”

“I would not know how.”

“Then you best start courting her in earnest or devise a plan to compromise her completely.”

Simon sighed. “I believe she’d embrace ruination rather than marry me.”

St. Aldwyn visibly cringed. “What the bloody hell did you do to her?”

“I did not *do* anything. However, my shock at discovering her still chaste may have implied that I believed her to be unvirtuous in the first place.”

A low whistle filled the room. “What idiocy would have you believe such a thing?”

“Would you shut your mouth? I...I just figured her flirtations in the past—”

“Please stop,” St. Aldwyn interrupted with widened eyes. “I thought Grey and I had it bad. You may be even worse than us, and that is saying a lot.”

Simon’s eyes narrowed in a glare.

“And I’m pretty certain it’s supposed to be the other way around, no? To act shocked when you discover she’s *not* an innocent.”

“I’m aware I made an utter ass of myself.”

“Oh, that’s good then. Am I to presume you discovered this information by seducing her or did you happen across one of her journals?”

“I would never snoop through her belongings,” Simon bit out.

“Seduction then, but I must admit, snooping through your wife’s belongings can be quite fun. Did you know Jo owns a—”

“St. Aldwyn,” Simon growled.

“You’re no fun.”

“My life is falling to shambles.”

“Hardly, but I can see why you might think so, being a Tremaine and all.”

Simon raked a shaky hand through his hair. St. Aldwyn could be bloody vexing at times.

“She wants to go home. I told her I would take her.”

“Are you certain that is wise?”

Simon shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. She is set on returning home and refuses to hide behind her friends. I will remain with her, naturally.”

“Good. Jo wouldn’t want her to be alone, not after what happened.”

“Have you heard anything from Shaw?”

“No, just that De Roux has disappeared into the wind.”

“He’s a sneaky bastard, I’ll give him that, but at least he now knows that Belle’s not alone.”

St. Alwyn nodded. “He will find himself at a disadvantage. If he was wise, he would not return to England.”

“Wisdom does not drive him, but the need for revenge.”

“Not wise, then. Score for us.”

Simon ran a gentle finger over Belle’s flushed cheek. She was so damn beautiful it hurt to look at her. He hated seeing her so fragile and in pain. It made him murderous. Yet he’d carelessly taken her innocence and made a terrible mistake in doing so. It may take time to win her over.

Time he did not possess. But he’d devised a plan to wear her defenses down, to seduce her with light touches and heated stares. She desired him and he’d be damned if he let her hide behind her own denial. And if he failed to tie her to him in every other way possible, well, he was not above plotting her ruination, not if it meant she’d be his.

And if that failed, God save them both, because he’d go mad.

“I do hope I’ll not get kicked out of my wife’s bed as a result of some ill-construed plot to capture the heart of her best friend. I’ll have my own revenge in my mind then.”

“No doubt you will get kicked out of your wife’s bed without any help from me.”

“One day, my friend, you will understand.”

“You should hope that I do. I may very well spend my every waking moment with you if I don’t.”

“Hell’s bells! I shudder to think what my wife would do to you.”

They both chuckled.

“Speaking of which, she still won’t be happy to discover you’ve taken Lady Belle home.”

“If you cannot keep your wife under control, old chap, that’s not my problem.”

One dark brow rose. “You say that now, but wait until you’re sharing a chamber pot with me.”

“Be as it may, I will leave it to you to inform your wife.”

“You are a cruel man, Westfield.”

No, he was a desperate one.

No other woman had ever made him feel such insanity. And desperate men acted in desperate ways. “Whatever I may be, I probably picked it up from you.”

“That makes me feel all happy inside.”

Simon grinned. He thought back on his friend’s pursuit of marital bliss. While Grey had used calculated manipulation methods to secure Evelyn and almost lost her, St. Aldwyn chose to be relentless in his

pursuit via the path of consistent annoyance. In Simon's estimation, Lady Josephine had given in out of sheer exasperation.

However, none of that would work on Lady Belle. She was different. She was haunted by an invisible force that he could not begin to fight without knowing its true form. And she hid that well behind a wall of resistance.

He would need to appeal to her heart...or her sweet tooth. He'd heard she had a particular love of cakes, after all. Perhaps his family lemon cake recipe would do the trick.

Chapter 13

It was almost midnight and Belle was still lost in the creation of her newest designs. At the moment, she was creating an exquisite gown that would drape across the beautiful form of a woman in the family way. Normally when a woman started to show, they were encouraged to stay at home and wear ugly dresses that did not do their bodies any justice. It had always been a particular dream of hers to design a magnificent piece to complement a woman's figure rather than hide it. And she figured she'd make Evelyn her test subject.

Luckily, her friend was all for scandalizing their peers.

Grey, on the other hand, may have a thing or seven to shout about it. For this gown had to forgo corsets altogether. A baby was already a weight to carry and Belle wished for the gown to feel like a light breeze to an expecting lady.

Evelyn was going to adore these dresses, Belle was certain of it.

She quickly finished the outer lines of the next gown, the scraping of her pencil on paper soothing her. Simon had yet to make an appearance and he did not yet carry the knowledge of her secret activities as Madam De La Frey. Better for it to stay that way. He was such an old goat when it came to propriety. She wondered whether he'd ever stopped to take into account some of his own inappropriate behavior.

Suddenly, without any warning, an arm entered her vision and she was grabbed from behind, a hand covering her mouth, stifling her scream. She struggled against the hard body of the man who attacked her, but he appeared unfazed by her struggles.

"Stop struggling, sis," a familiar voice murmured in her ear.

Quinn?

She stilled.

After a moment, he continued, "I'm going to let you go. Promise you'll not scream?"

She gave a single nod.

The hand that covered her mouth lifted and when she remained silent and unmoving he let her go. She whirled on her brother. "Are you out of your mind? Accosting me in our home, Quinn? What is the meaning of this? And where have you been? Has something happened? Where is Bradford?"

He gave her a sheepish smile. "I'm sorry, sis, but no one can know I'm here and it was hardly an attack. You look beautiful, by the way."

She studied his face, noting every line, every one of his sandy whiskers. "Then what would you call it then? A surprise greeting?"

He had the grace to look ashamed. "I've forgotten how direct you can be."

She punched him in the shoulder. Hard.

"Ah! What was that for?"

"I've missed you," Belle said simply.

His gaze softened. "I've missed you, too. But first, I have a few questions. Like why the Earl of Westfield has been secretly living in our house? In *my* chamber, no less. And why the devil did you never send word that our aunt is bedridden?"

Belle flushed at the thought of her brother knowing about Simon. She supposed it could have been worse. Her brother could have arrived while Simon was sleeping in *her* bedchambers.

"She can leave her bed, and does. Had you been here, Quinn, you'd have known her health is not what it used to be. But no, you and Bradford abandoned me, so I made do with what I had."

"We did not abandon you, Belle, and we sent letters."

"Yes, I read your letters, nary one with a return address. So even if I wanted to inform you of our aunt's health, I was never able to."

Quinn had the good graces to blush at her words.

"And Westfield?" he asked with narrowed eyes, his arms folding over his broad chest.

Belle lifted her chin. "I've been feeling unsafe lately, so Westfield kindly offered to stay here for a while."

"Why did you not take auntie and depart for the country to our cousins?"

And put her Holly, Willow, and Poppy in danger?

Absolutely not.

But how could she reveal her predicament to Quinn without revealing the truth?

"You had more than enough funds," he continued.

Funds she'd spent on a fool's errand. "Yet, all the funds in the world cannot buy brothers now, can it? And that is what I've needed these

past years.”

“Damn, sis, you still know to make a man feel guilty as hell.” He raked a hand through his blond hair. “Westfield? Is there something I need to know?” he pressed.

“No, there is nothing you *need* to know.”

Her brother regarded her for a moment, seemingly deciding if he should press the issue, before finally confessing, “Look I know about Edgar and I suspect Westfield moved in for your protection. I also presume you are protecting your friends by not mentioning recent events.”

Belle jaw dropped open.

The shock was swiftly replaced by betrayal, which twisted in her gut. “You know about him? How?”

He looked away, but not before Belle saw another flash of guilt cross his face. “There are things I cannot discuss now, but you must advise your little band of ragamuffins to let De Roux be. We have everything in hand.”

Ragamuffins?

Wait. We?

We have everything in hand?

An unsettling feeling stole over her.

Could her brother be a spy?

“I do not understand.”

“Bradford and I, we are aware De Roux is hunting you. We know he threw you overboard a ship after you attempted to lure him out,” the last he said with a fierce scowl before he continued in a disapproving tone, “Your little band saved you, yes, but you are all in over your heads.”

“You’ve been *spying* on us?” Belle accused even though she still reeled from his earlier revelations.

“Ever since—” He looked away.

“Ever since what, Quinn?” she demanded in a stern voice.

His jaw clenched. “Ever since...”

“What...?” Belle’s voice trailed off into silence but then it dawned on her.

Ever since she almost died on the docks.

Her brothers *knew*, and still, they hadn’t returned for her. Still, they stayed away.

Breathe, Belle.

She clutched her stomach as memories stabbed at her mind, but this time she attempted to grab hold of them. The unsettling feeling only magnified.

“You were there,” she finally managed. It wasn’t a question, but a soft confirmation of the fact.

His face had lost all color. "I was the one that found you."

A soft cry escaped her lips as horror washed over her. She remembered a ship, vaguely, but beyond that she fought to recall anything of how she survived.

"You've known all along. But you never came home, not even when I needed you the most."

His face awash with grief, he too seemed lost in memories. "There was so much blood. I thought you were dead. I believed I'd been too late. But my first man felt a slight pulse, and we raced you to my ship where the doctor took care of your wounds. I kept tabs on you more closely after that."

Belle understood his anguish but could not summon any pity. Yes, she'd faced her demons a long time ago and still his betrayal stung deep.

Something else ticked at her mind, too. "It was you. You stole the drawings from me."

"Yes, that was me," he whispered, "It was safer in our hands than yours. We did not want you to carry that burden as well."

Her heart hurt.

"Why were you there, Quinn?"

He sighed. "Years ago, I was tasked to capture a French spy. By the time I realized it was your Edgar, it had already been too late."

"He's not my Edgar," she snapped. "So you are a spy."

He said nothing.

It made sense—his sudden departure from her life only to never return again.

"Does Bradford know?"

Quinn looked away.

"Does Bradford know?"

"Of course Bradford knows. He's been hell bent on destroying everyone who had a part in that mission."

So *both* her brothers were spies.

"You both knew yet still you stayed away? Why?"

Betrayal had given way to anger. How dare they save her and then abandon her again? It was even worse than she thought.

"You do not understand, sis. We wanted to return home badly after that, but we could not. In our vendetta to destroy the people who hurt you, we needed to remain away until it was finished. Your life would have been in danger."

"News flash, Quinn, the person who hurt me is still very much alive and still continues to hurt me." She threw her hands in the air. "How is it that I have two brothers who are spies yet they cannot protect me from one madman?"

Quinn flinched. "Yes, I know. The bastard is as sneaky as a rat. He's

always three steps ahead of us.”

“And now you want my friends just to let it go? Hell, Quinn, did it ever occur to you that you might have succeeded a long time ago if you’d just remained here?”

“Of course it did. But we have it under control now.”

That brought Belle up short. “We? Bradford is here?”

He nodded. “Look, don’t be mad at Brad. He wants to be here and he will, once that French bastard is taken care off. What he’s not aware of, however, is that you are secretly housing Westfield. Let us just keep that little bit of information to ourselves.”

It occurred to Belle that her brother still did not understand what saddened her. They were not the ones who had been abandoned by their family. They weren’t the ones who had to face the darkest moments of their lives alone because they’d had each other.

She, on the other hand, had been left with her aunt. And while she loved her aunt dearly, her aunt was a bit batty—a fact that mostly allowed Belle to do as she pleased. But it did not keep her from feeling alone.

“I’ve no care for what Bradford might think. Westfield and every one of my friends have been here for me when it was clear I’ve been abandoned by you. They don’t leave when danger lurks, they band together. If not for them, I would be *dead* right now, Quinn. They saved me this time—not you.”

Quinn looked away. “I hope that one day you may come to understand, Belle. But for now, I must ask you to back down or risk not only your lives but ours as well.”

His grave tone gave her pause. She sensed the shame he carried in his heart. She had to admit that beyond her anger and her betrayal, the prospect of them becoming a family again warmed her heart. She would focus on that. “I will see what I can do, but I cannot promise anything.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t get to you in time. That is twice now.”

Belle sighed. “I do not blame you, not really. You were not the one who fell in love with a French spy.”

“If we stayed, we might have known.”

“Then I would not have almost perished in a pool of my own blood! How *would* I live?”

Her brother shot her a glare. “That is not funny.”

“No?” she asked innocently.

Her brother shook his head. “You have a dark sense of humor, sis.”

“It came back with me from the other side.”

“Belle!”

“Fine, I’ll stop, but be nice to my friends. They are my family.”

He scowled. “I still cannot fathom how you ever became involved

with those Shaws.”

“What is it about the Shaws that has every bloody male in England on edge? They’ve done nothing but protect me and help keep me safe, which is more than I can say about you.”

“That’s a low blow, sis. You know everything we do is for your protection.”

“Then why is it that they are here, actively helping me, whereas you are not?”

“I am deeply sorry you feel betrayed and one day we will reveal all to you, but please trust me. We are taking care of De Roux.”

Belle nodded, deciding to let it go for now. The fact that her brothers were spies and left for her safety—supposedly—helped soothe the hard pinch of betrayal. She could accept that more easily than their abandoning of her to travel the world on some adventurous voyage. “Fine.”

His shoulders sagged in relief and with a quick peck on the cheek, he faded into the darkness. “We will see you soon.”

Belle watched until her brother slipped from the room. She was reeling from his visit. They never truly abandoned her, did they? Or was she simply reaching for excuses?

She plopped down on her bed, resisting the urge to call out to Quinn, to beg him to stay or take her with him.

Quinn and Bradford were spies.

The irony was not lost on her. Perhaps she should become one as well, that is, if women were even allowed to do so. Perhaps she’d be the first lady spy. How grand! It would be a good way to channel the deep sadness that oftentimes surfaced within her, the sadness that made it impossible for her to breathe.

Another unmistakable silhouette slipped into her room.

Simon.

She’d always be able to tell him apart from any other man. A subtle tingling at the nape of her neck always signaled his presence. She was used to it by now, it seemed as though it had been like that forever. He emerged from the shadows into the light shed by the single candle on her nightstand.

“What’s wrong?” he asked when she saw her sitting on the bed, sensing something off.

She attempted to smile. “Why would anything be wrong?”

“You look as though you’ve seen a ghost.”

Belle was amazed at his ability to see through her so well. His senses appeared to be aware of her on a level she was not sure she was ready to face yet. It spoke of an intimacy that she dare not mull over now, not with the knowledge of her brothers and De Roux still lingering in the air.

“It’s nothing of importance.” Translation: it had nothing to do with the French bastard. Well, that was not entirely the truth. But Belle still hadn’t decided whether she’d inform her friends of these new revelations. Honestly, how would she explain her brothers’ involvement without revealing their secret? What possible reason could she give these men to back down, these men that had risked their lives to save hers?

Simon, however, was like a hound on the trail of a fox. He crossed his arms over his chest.

“Will sharing whatever happened cause you tears?” he asked.

His expression brought to mind an image of him, holding a crying baby at arm’s length and glancing around, horrified.

How utterly male.

Her eyes narrowed on him. “No.”

His face relaxed. “Then I see no reason that you shouldn’t tell me. Someone was here.”

Belle’s eyes flew to him. “You cannot possibly know that.”

“On the contrary, my dear, there are muddy boot prints on the carpet,” he motioned to the telltale prints. “It could not have been De Roux or you would not be here. So who was it?”

Belle blinked down at the pair of muddy imprints in disbelief. Though they were faint, they were there for all to see. Her brother clearly was not a stealthy spy. And drat Simon and his hawk eyes.

“Simon—”

To her surprise, rage suddenly contorted his face and his hands started to shake.

“Have you taken a lover?”

“What! No! How dare you imply such a thing?” Belle stood suddenly, restless. “Not to say where would I have the time or the opportunity?”

“Then who was here?”

“Fine! It was Quinn.”

His eyes widened in outrage. “Bloomington? That young pup? He’s barely out of the cradle!”

Belle’s temper exploded and she marched up to him, stabbing a finger at his chest. “I’ve not taken a lover. Honestly, after our last encounter, I do not see why anyone would enjoy the act. There is nothing pleasurable about it.”

That seemed to bring him up short, his cheeks coloring. “Then who was here?”

His jealousy astounded her. “Quinn, my *brother*.”

He blinked. “Your brother?”

“Yes. Also known as a sibling.”

He glanced around the room. “Where is he now?”

There was no point in lying. “He left again. He’s also aware you stayed in his room, secretly skulking about.”

His shoulders had slumped in relief, but the last comment snapped them back to attention. “He knows and he did nothing?” he asked astonished.

She shrugged. “Of course, the list of transgressions is long. He’s also aware of my adventure in the ocean, and about De Roux. Indeed, he seems to have been keeping an eye on me.”

“Does he know what happened four years ago?”

She nodded, a harsh breath escaping her. “Yes.”

“Your brother is a spy.”

It wasn’t a question.

Belle turned away, a bubble of laughter escaping her. She was glad Simon had come to the deduction on his own. “It would seem that way. My brothers have quite the story to tell. Once De Roux is taken care of, Quinn said they will return home.”

And he’d be required to leave, though that was left unspoken.

“When this is over, we may not have any choice but to marry, Belle.”

“I believe I’ve made myself clear on the matter,” Belle sputtered.

He took two steps closer to her until only a breath of air separated them. “I’ve been living in your home. I’ve known you intimately. And I plan on sleeping in this room with you. If any of it ever became known, you would be ruined.”

Belle lifted her chin in defiance. “I was ruined a long time ago, Simon. Perhaps not in the sense you thought, but in every other way.”

“What happened to you will never define who you are. And you must be aware of the consequences of my staying here.”

He was too close. His scent was making her all hazy and doe-eyed.

“Then go if you must, but I will never marry. Not you, not anyone.”

It was the hardest thing she’d ever done, to keep declining Simon. He was everything she’d always desired years ago. If only she had met him then. Things may have turned out different. It was, however, no use mourning the past.

Before she registered his intention, Simon lowered his head and captured her lips in a possessive kiss. Taken off guard, Belle didn’t protest when he lifted her into his arms and deposited her onto the bed, never once breaking the kiss as he followed her down. A small sigh of pleasure escaped her.

His tongue flickered over her lips and Belle moaned at the sensation, giving him the opening he desired. His tongue plunged into her mouth even as his hands lifted her night rail, his hand roaming the length of her leg.

She held her breath as his hand circled her hip and then lightly,

carefully, traced her scar. His kiss softened and her heart lurched.

“You aren’t getting rid of me so easily, Belle. I will make up for my blunder—that is a promise.”

Belle opened her mouth to protest, but he kissed her again. At the tail end of the kiss, he rolled her so that she faced away from him before scooping her up against his chest, his body protectively cradling hers. Pulling up the blanket, he covered them both before placing his arm around her.

“Good night, Belle.”

For a moment she considered kicking him out or at least telling him that his quest was hopeless, but she did not. And that alone worried her.

Chapter 14

Belle woke the following morning with a tickling sensation on the back of her neck. At first, she leaned into the sensation, wanting more, so much more, but when the unmistakable wetness of a tongue swirled about her earlobe, her eyes shot open.

She attempted to sit up, but her body was firmly pinned to the soft mattress by a large arm across her midriff, whose fingers were resting on her womanly parts down *there*, and a leg, which covered her own.

She gasped as one of his fingers ran between the folds of her cleft.

"I thought you would never wake," Simon's low voice murmured in her ear.

Belle lay still, still groggy from sleep, though not so much as to not notice that her body was aching with need. When she did not sputter in protest or shove him away, that expert little finger probed into her warmth.

"Christ, you're so warm."

Warm, yes. She felt rather warm, her mind surrendering to the sensation of his finger thrusting in and out of her, the hard edge of his manhood pressing up against her.

So warm...

Saints preserve her. She should stop him. She should stop what he was doing, but his mouth had lowered to her exposed breasts, her eyes closing when his tongue darted out to savor her nipple. Not an ounce of strength, or will, surfaced to stop him.

When his green eyes lifted to meet hers, they were blazing with intensity and if her body could have gone up in flames, it would have done so then.

"What are you doing?" she murmured, her voice hoarse with desire.

"I would think it quite obvious," he said in a teasing manner, before

his lips lowered to her breast again, the invasion of his finger driving her to the brink of something unexplained.

It was quite some time before she could breathe evenly again, his skillful tongue robbing her of air, leaving her to gasp and pant at his onslaught.

Belle was completely paralyzed with pleasure as he kissed her and kissed her, first slowly, then more urgently, scorching her skin as he tasted every inch of her body.

He had not been jesting when he promised to make it up to her for she was certain she never wanted to leave this bed again. Her idle hands found his back. She was not surprised to find it naked against her touch. He'd done short work with their clothing.

She squirmed beneath him when the weight of his body lifted, his hand leaving her swollen mound. A disappointed whimper escaped her. His deep chuckle reached her ears and she pouted. Now that he'd thoroughly started to make it up to her, she didn't wish for him to stop.

Their eyes locked and Belle noticed with delight his face was as flushed as she imagined her to be.

"Do you want me to stop?"

Now, why would he ask her such a thing?

Squirming beneath him, she shot him an exasperating stare, "I will maim you if you do."

His answering grin sent delicious flutters down to her toes and his lips captured hers in a ravishing kiss. She clung to him as his knees parted her thighs, his manhood probing at her entrance.

His lips left hers as he moved down to her neck, then her breasts before Belle felt him press against her. She groaned in ecstasy when his thick hardness finally pressed into her heat, filling her.

No pain accompanied his invasion this time, only the marvelous need for *more*.

A growl of pleasure tore from his throat and Belle bucked beneath him, her hands gripping his back more tightly.

Fully sheathed into her core, he raised up to lightly brush a kiss over her brow. "You are exquisite Belle, and you feel so damn good."

Thrusting his hip once, the scoundrel grinned down at her when she groaned in sensual pleasure.

He leaned down to whisper in her ear. "More?"

"You are cruel, Simon," she whimpered, wriggling beneath him, urging him to move again.

He chuckled. "More?"

"Yes! More, more, more, more—"

He silenced her with a tender kiss, and his hips began to move in slow, gentle, thrusts. A sensation that hadn't been there the first time

built in her gradually, quickly surpassing anything she'd ever felt before as he drove into her harder, more urgently, until some happened, until something exploded inside her and a wave of rapture overwhelmed her senses.

She hadn't realized she'd cried out until Simon silenced her with a kiss, his own roar of bliss muted by her lips.

"Bloody hell," Simon muttered as he collapsed beside her, his rapid breathing matching that her own.

Her sentiments exactly.

Still dazed, Belle reeled in the aftermath of how Simon had dominated her body. She felt enchanted by the sudden tenderness that stole over her, making her want to kiss him, thank him, hold him and murmur sweet words into his ear.

She didn't, of course.

Instead, she settled comfortably into the cradle of his arm, content to savor this moment and commit every little detail, every tiny prickle of pleasure to her memory.

Much later, which turned out to be not so much later, after all, Belle was woken by soft kisses to her brow, her nose, her cheek and, finally, her lips.

Her eyes fluttered open to the image of Simon grinning down at her. She felt her own lips stretch into a smile and she tried not to mull over the notion of how waking up to this, to him, every day would be quite splendid.

"As much as I hate to leave this bed, we have guests arriving soon."

We?

Guests?

At her confused expression, he continued, "Your brothers' return is not something we can keep from them."

That snapped her out of her euphoria.

"You gathered everyone here, without discussing it with me first?"

Her tone had him frowning. "I thought sooner would be better than later."

"That is not the point," Belle snapped, tossing the covers aside before snatching them back again, covering her exposed flesh with a blush.

"What is the point then?"

The way he said it, so calm and patient, his brow rising at her attempt to conceal her body, only served to irritate her more.

What was the point again? Oh yes, it wasn't so much that he called a meeting, which she would have done, but the fact that he'd taken the liberty to call the meeting on her behalf. One night of passion did not constitute the dominion of her life.

"The point," Belle furrowed her brow and scrambled from the bed, taking the covers with her, "is that any number of servants can witness our gathering and..." she trailed off, uncertain at what exactly she was getting at. Her servants were most discreet. But then again, she would not put it passed a spy to insert a spy in her household. "What if—"

"We are gathering in the garden for a small tea party. That is all they will see."

A tea party?

It was Belle's turn to raise a brow.

Simon shrugged. "It's a beautiful day to host a tea party and the garden provides more privacy to talk freely."

"Fine," Belle relented, if only to make him leave her room. "Now if you'll please, I need to dress."

"I can always help you—"

"No!"

He held up his hands in defeat but was grinning again, tugging up his breeches. "I'll go, but first," he said, his gaze intensifying, "will you marry me?"

Her eyes rounded to saucers. "No!"

His smile resembled that of a tiger. "Not yet, then."

She held her breath as he quickly covered himself with clothes and gave her a quick peck on the forehead before slipping from her room. Only then did she release her breath on a shaky exhale.

Her gaze traveled to the rumpled bed, her cheeks flushing bright red again. Drat the man for being such a fine example of everything she ever desired.

An hour later, Belle sauntered out to the garden and sure enough, tables had been carried outside, decorated with an array of cakes, sandwiches and cheese.

How on earth had Simon managed this in such a small amount of time? Even her aunt had ventured outside and was currently napping in the shade. Belle shook her head fondly. No doubt her aunt would wake up only toward the end.

Her heart melted at his consideration.

It appeared Simon had found a way to bring a spark of light back to her otherwise somber situation. Perhaps he was feeling a bit sentimental after their night together, just like her.

Jo and her husband were the first to saunter through the French doors that led to the garden. Her friend's face was a picture of pure delight and in complete contrast to St. Aldwyn's boredom.

"By saints!" he exclaimed. "It is true. Westfield has arranged a tea party. What has the world come to?"

“Oh hush! I think it’s marvelous and you can certainly take note of his actions.”

St. Aldwyn looked aghast. “Am I truly to make the descent from wicked rake to heart-ensnared gentleman to an even further-tamed fop who holds tea parties?” he asked, his voice dripping with disgust.

Jo ignored him and greeted Belle warmly with a kiss on the cheek. “How are you fairing?”

“Oh you know, as scandalous as always.”

“There is an old woman sleeping under the tree,” St. Aldwyn interrupted them.

Belle glanced at her aunt. Sure enough, her aunt wasn’t sitting up against the tree anymore, but now napping on her back. “I daresay she has reached the age of napping.”

“Something to look forward to then.”

Jo swatted him just as Simon glided through the doors. He looked pleased as punch.

Belle’s heart fluttered as it did every time she saw him, but she quickly glanced away. Jo was too perceptive for her own good. They would know if she was batting eyes at Simon. Not that she would ever bat eyes at him, but already she felt her face heating up.

“I say, the day turned out quite marvelous,” Simon said as he reached them.

“What have you done to my friend?” St. Aldwyn grumbled in Belle’s direction.

Belle almost snorted. “St. Aldwyn, you are as chirpy as ever.”

He ignored her. “Westfield, how nice of you to grace us with your presence, as if hosting a tea wasn’t enough.”

“Old chap, happy to see marriage hasn’t improved your surly nature in the least. Where are the Shaws?”

“Right behind you.”

James wore a ready smile while his brother’s blank expression never faltered.

Derek regarded the delicious sweets with cold eyes. “May I ask who came up with this idea?”

“I did,” Simon said with narrowed eyes. “Thought it a welcome change to the usual overstuffed study.”

“Of course.” Derek’s expression did not change, but there was an unmistakable dry note in his voice.

It was well known that the Tremaine siblings’ imaginations were never lacking in substance.

“Yes, well, there has been a new development that requires discussion,” Belle interjected before Simon could say anything.

Jo frowned at them, her eyes flickering between Derek, Simon, and Belle.

Belle stepped forward, breaking any direction of thought her friend's mind might have taken. "Perhaps we can avail ourselves to some tea and cakes first before we take a stroll in the gardens. No need to not enjoy the treats."

At James's grumbling assent, they moved to where delicious lemon cakes beckoned. Of course, Derek was the only one to forgo eating, availing himself only to a cup of tea. The others, well, they all dug right in.

"Perhaps now, Westfield," Derek murmured moments later, "You will enlighten us as to the reason you invited us here." His eyes had taken in every angle of the garden, even darting over her slumberous aunt in his assessment.

"We can let De Roux be," Belle murmured before Simon could give anything away about her brothers.

Silence met her statement. She glanced at them then, noting the surprise registered on their faces—well, on all except Derek Shaw's.

He did not even blink.

"And why, precisely, would you wish for us to stop our mission to apprehend a foreign spy that means to not only to harm you but possibly the Crown?" Derek asked.

"There are more forces at work here than you are aware of."

"That's not good enough," Derek answered.

James stepped forward. "And since when have you been so deeply embroiled in this that you know things that we clearly do not?" The note in James's voice seemed to suggest if there was spy business in the works, he would know it all.

Since my brother told me so.

Belle risked a glance in Simon's direction. Should she—could she—tell them? If word ever got out, would the lives of her brothers be in danger? But then, being spies, they possessed the means to take care of themselves, didn't they? And Quinn had asked her to tell her friends to let this be. How could she convince them without explaining why?

But then, did she count Derek and James Shaw as true friends? They'd been cloaked in mystery since the moment she met them. On the other hand, they did save her life. It was impossible to tell if she could trust them with her brothers' lives, however. And instinct warned that she should always look out for her siblings first.

Perhaps it was best not to say anything—not yet anyway.

"I am not embroiled in anything other than being a pawn in a game of chess. But I have it on good authority that the matter is being taken care of as we speak. I, for one, would love nothing more than for it to be over."

Derek Shaw nodded. "Understood."

Belle narrowed her eyes on him. So did Jo and St. Aldwyn, who'd up to that moment been thoughtful, but silent.

"Who is this source of yours, Lady Belle?" James asked.

"It would not be a source, Mr. Shaw, if I tell you."

"Yet you felt you could trust Westfield with the information."

St. Aldwyn took a step closer to Westfield. "I'd be careful making accusations if I were you."

Still, Belle did not deny it. What was it about men and their inherent need to want to be aware of everything, even if it was none of their concern?

"I am not purposefully trying to be difficult, Mr. Shaw, but it truly is not my place to tell. Lives are at stake here."

Hers especially.

Simon shifted to place himself in a proactive stance before her when James Shaw still looked unconvinced. "I was there when her source made an appearance. She speaks the truth."

Belle groaned inwardly at his declaration. Jo's gaze whipped to her, a knowing smile playing across her features.

This was exactly what Belle had wished to avoid.

"Oh, and when did this source inform you?" Jo asked curiously.

"Midnight," Simon answered without hesitation, not realizing he had stepped directly into her friend's little trap.

"Oh!" Jo exclaimed. "I had not realized that the two of you had become so acquainted with one another."

Belle groaned.

Simon scowled in Jo's direction. "I heard a noise and went to investigate or is that not the purpose of it all?"

Belle released her breath slowly.

"It was your brother that visited you," Derek Shaw stated with such a certainty that everyone stilled.

Belle's lips parted.

How had he known?

She held his gaze though she refused to reply to his statement, instead only tilting her head to the side. Everyone watched her with growing expectancy. Her friends would never push her for an answer, but St. Aldwyn did study Westfield with narrowed eyes.

Belle sighed. "Why would you believe it was my brother?"

Derek's lips twitched upward, an uncomfortable sight. "Your brother is the only one you would trust, besides us, with your life. And your life is at stake here, Lady Belle. Make no mistake."

His deduction seemed simple enough, but something warned Belle it was anything but.

Hands clapped from somewhere in the garden and two tall figures emerged from behind a large tree, their faces grim.

Oh no.

“Well done, Shaw. It appears your power of deduction is as sharp as ever.”

Derek clenched his jaw.

Belle’s gaze flickered from one Shaw to the other and then to Quinn before settling on Bradford, who watched her with such an intense gaze, she flushed. She wanted to run and fling herself into his embrace, but refrained from acting on the impulse, instead keeping a cool, indifferent, albeit red-faced, exterior.

“Belle,” he murmured softly, a slight hitch in his voice.

She searched his face, but for that slight hitch, there was no indication of any emotion reflected there. Lines had formed in the corner of his eyes, lines that hadn’t been there when she last saw him. She glanced away without a word, but only after she’d committed every one of those new lines on his angular face to memory, for she did not know when he disappeared this time, when or if she would see him again.

To the group, it was clear they were siblings, what with their matching blond hair and stormy blue eyes.

“Well, aren’t you two a sight for sore eyes,” St. Aldwyn drawled, appearing bored.

“And here you are attending a tea party hosted by my sister, how the mighty hath fallen,” Bradford shot back.

“I, at least, was invited.”

Belle sighed. It was not her tea party. “I’m hardly allowed to leave my own home. A compromise had to be made.”

“Good,” both her brothers echoed simultaneously.

“So you would have us stand back and stop attempting to capture the notoriously foul-breathed De Roux?” Derek’s voice cracked through the air.

Belle’s eyes swung to him in astonishment. Had there been a touch humor in his voice? And when had he heard her many references to the man’s breath? But more shockingly, had he actually resorted to name calling?

“We have the situation well in hand,” Bradford stated, “You are, however, welcome to join us on our terms, but I would prefer that from here on out my sister and her,” he glanced at Jo, “*lady* friends not be included.”

The women gasped in outrage and St. Aldwyn clamped a hand over his wife’s mouth when she would have replied.

Quinn held up a placating hand. “De Roux is a cunning bastard, not to mention dangerous. We cannot in good conscience include ladies on this mission. Besides, you already have your hands full protecting yourselves.”

Belle had no problem staying out of the line of fire. Jo, on the other hand, always preferred the front line.

Bradford's eyes found hers and her shoulders tightened. "You nearly died when that bastard gutted you and you almost drowned not even a week ago. I refuse to take any more chances with your life." He glanced around at the others and announced, "If any of you oppose to this, you will find yourselves arrested and detained until this bastard is taken care off, reputations be damned."

Oh.

Her heart fluttered happily, pleased by her brother's protectiveness. How she'd missed it.

Expectedly, Jo stomped on her husband's foot and he released her with a yelp. She eluded his grasp and stalked over to Bradford, poking him in the chest. "Fine, but do not think for one moment I trust in your capabilities, which I take we've suffered with now for four years in the running." Bradford's jaw hardened, but Jo continued uncaring, "And do not for one moment believe I trust *you*."

"She's a feisty one," Quinn quipped with a lavish smile, "Too bad you did not wait for me, sweetheart."

"Quinn!" Belle admonished.

St. Aldwyn growled in the back of his throat.

Bradford ignored them.

"You believe we cannot take care of it?"

Jo waved his comment aside. "I believe in results and you've shown none."

Guilt flickered in his eyes before it was gone, replaced by coldness. "You know nothing of it."

Her friend held her brother's gaze unblinkingly, before she said, "I know Derek and James and I trust *them*. We will back off only if they assist you in this endeavor."

Bradford paused, narrowing his eyes at Jo, before replying. "You are quite the busy bee, Lady Josephine. Do not think I'm not aware of your, how would you put it, *activities*."

Jo snorted.

St. Aldwyn stepped forward and wrapped his arms around his wife, pulling her away from Bradford. He glared over at Bradford over the top of Jo's head. "Do not for one moment think I won't put my fist up your ass if you ever speak to my wife like that again."

"Settle your feathers," Belle intervened. "I doubt that Derek and James would allow themselves to be left out at this stage in the game."

The brothers nodded in agreement.

"And I, for one, would feel much better if Lady Josephine spent more time with Belle," Quinn said with a wink to Belle, who glanced

quickly in Simon's direction and back to Bradford, who hadn't noticed the exchange.

Simon, however, had not missed the exchange and his eyes narrowed on Quinn. Of course, he would prefer it if Jo remained holed up with her husband.

"Belle is safe as long as she remains within the house."

Bradford narrowed his eyes on Westfield.

Shoot.

But Quinn had noticed and stepped in front of his brother, cutting off his narrowed regard before he discerned anything that might set his temper off. "We should be heading out before someone takes note of our presence."

Belle sobered. This time she did not hold back, she flew into her brother's arms. "Be safe, Quinn."

He placed an affectionate kiss on her forehead. "Stay out of trouble."

She glanced up at Bradford, who stood staring at her, unmoving. She hesitated, but only for a moment, before launching herself in his arms, too. He held her tight, a slight tremor running through his body. "We will be home soon."

He let her go and Belle touched his arm gently. "I don't blame you for what happened to me, Bradford. It wasn't your fault."

"I should have been there," he whispered.

"And I should *not* have been there. You cannot be at fault for a decision I made." Emotion clogged Belle's throat. "You should leave before you are seen."

He nodded, and then glanced over at the Shaws. "We will meet soon," he said and then both her brothers retreated around the edge of the garden.

Belle watched the empty space they occupied only moments before, her heart burdened with fear for them.

"They will be fine," Simon murmured, coming up beside her.

Belle hoped that he was right. Her brothers were finally back and she did not wish to lose them now.

As the group thinned, each heading out in their own direction, no one saw the figure lurking nearby, chuckling. His evil cackle would have stroked fear into the heart of a lesser man.

Chapter 15

That night Simon stared broodingly into the fire that danced aimlessly in the hearth. It reminded him of Belle and he imagined her in those flames, dancing. He imagined joining her as their bodies scorched one another's and set their souls aflame. At that exact moment, he rather felt that he could burst into flames, but not in flames of passion. No, this heat was of a more violent—or rather infuriated—nature. She would be the death of him.

“I asked her to marry me.”

St. Aldwyn lifted an arrogant brow. “And what did the enchanting Lady Belle say?” The question was a mere formality since it was obvious from Simon's dour mood that it hadn't gone according to his wishes.

“She said no.”

His friend regarded him through hooded eyes. “Lady Belle is a spirited one, but then again, she's friends with my wife.”

“I do not see how that accounts for anything.”

“You will in time.”

Simon heaved a heavy sighed. “I've been living alone with her, it is only right to marry.”

But looking back now, she'd made it clear from the start that she did not want him for a husband. But unfortunately for him, or her, he was drawn to her like a beggar was drawn to a piece of forbidden pie. He did not want to let her go. It was that simple.

Only it wasn't.

He raked a trembling hand through his hair.

“I doubt Lady Belle is the sort to presume your presence in her home is grounds for marriage,” St. Aldwyn drawled. “If there's one thing I've learned from courting my once very independent wife, it is

that women are bloody good at the art of war. There's no reasoning with them."

As usual, his friend had a point. Lady Belle was as independent as they came. He blamed her brothers for that. Their failure to protect her had produced a willful yet unfailingly free-spirited young woman. Not that Simon desired her any other way—it just made the task before him almost insurmountable. *Almost*.

A footman suddenly entered the parlor, where they sat, with a tray of tea, bread, and cheese. He paused when both men's steely gazes met his. The tray trembled in his hands. "Lady Belle ordered a tray of snacks, my lords."

Simon glared at the footman, who scurried away quickly after he deposited the tray carelessly, spilling the tea.

He picked up the pot and gave it a good sniff.

Camomile.

"Bloody hell! Now she sends me herbal tea? Does she believe she's to calm my nerves?"

"No doubt," St. Aldwyn said suppressing a smile. He helped himself to some cheese. "Are you going to pour that or sniff at it the whole damn day?"

Simon shot his friend a menacing look before he poured them some tea. His stomach growled as he caught a whiff of the bread. Vexing woman. She knew him better than he thought she did.

"And those damn nightgowns...I would sincerely like to throttle the mysterious Madam De La Frey for allowing her creations to be sold to unmarried ladies of the ton."

St. Aldwyn nodded. "Jo also has a penchant for the infamous madam's gowns. I do believe the madam is promoting independence with her lavish designs."

Simon agreed. "It makes me wonder who the madam is. It is obvious she wishes to remain in the shadows, she may even be one of us."

St. Aldwyn took a sip of his tea. "Or she's an old crone who prefers to remain unnamed."

"Or she is a he."

"Now that is a disturbing thought," St. Aldwyn choked.

They ate their bread and cheese in relative silence, Simon deep in thought as he stared into the flames. He hated to admit it, but the chamomile had been just the thing to improve his mood.

"I could kidnap her," he murmured into the fire.

St. Aldwyn said nothing for a moment. "You could, but that may make for a rocky marriage."

"I could be kidnapped."

"I cannot see how that would work."

"If I kidnapped myself, it may lure out the affection she holds for me." Perhaps if she believed him in danger she'd realize she could not live without him.

"Christ man," St. Aldwyn choked out. "That's ridiculous."

Fine. Perhaps it was ridiculous wool-gathering on his part, but he was at a loss as to how to proceed.

"Besides, the lady would have your heart served to her warm and toasty if she ever learned of the scheme."

Simon shrugged. "But if she didn't, perhaps she'd give chase in an attempt to rescue me."

St. Aldwyn just shook his head with a small smile.

But Simon could just see it: Belle chasing after him to rescue him from his kidnappers, sword in hand, long hair cascading from her back. Naked. Well, perhaps that last detail was a bit impractical.

Very well, he knew he was being ridiculous now, but it was worth the entertaining image in his mind.

"I never imagined, when I finally asked for the hand of the woman I wished to marry, she'd simply say no."

She allowed him to seduce her, make love to her. But marry him? That she simply wouldn't do. It was inconceivable and troubling. It made him want to act irrationally.

Quite honestly, Simon felt rather foolish. It was not a feeling he was familiar or comfortable with. No matter how he attempted to understand her line of reasoning, something did not seem right. She was hiding something. The gnawing suspicion grew with each passing moment and only made him more determined to discover her secrets. And if his suspicions proved correct, her secret held all the answers he needed to break through her guard.

"You have a wild imagination, my friend. If I were you I would just point a pistol in her general direction and ask sweetly."

Simon's eyes bulged as he sputtered out crumbs of bread. "And that would not make for a rocky marriage?"

"It seems to me that whichever way you choose in obtaining her hand in marriage, it will be rocky."

"I do not see how I can change her mind; she is determined to remain unattached."

"Perhaps once this madman is found and dispatched of she will change her mind," St. Aldwyn suggested.

Simon shook his head. "I suspect her reservations run deeper than the threat of De Roux."

"Curious. Have you ever considered that the wound she might have sustained may be the cause for her reservations?"

Simon's head shot up at that. "Did Jo mention something in the way of it?"

“No,” St. Aldwyn murmured. “My wife would not betray Lady Belle’s confidence, but considering what you know of the lady, it seems to me that any reservation centralizes around what transpired after she met De Roux.”

Simon considered that. It remained a strong possibility yet he failed to see how her wound may have influenced her decision so irrecoverably. But then he remembered the jagged scar that bastard had inflicted. He’d run his finger along the ragged edges, which spanned from the side of her...

He stilled.

Of course.

Horror cloaked over him as understanding dawned.

“Son of a bitch!” Simon growled.

Pain for what she might have felt upon learning such a tragedy pierced his heart. There was still every chance he may be wrong, but the knowledge of it felt right. It explained so much of her behavior and her determination to remain unaffected and unattached. She’d never marry any man because she could not provide her husband with an heir.

“I take it you have come to some sort of clarity?”

Simon’s heart hurt. “Her scar. I suspect she cannot bear children.” Even as Simon said the words he wanted to throttle De Roux with his bare hands.

“He’s a dead man,” St. Aldwyn growled, rage in the edge of his voice. “Will you confront her with your suspicions?”

“No,” he said with a shake of his head. “She will shut me out and I will have no chance to pierce her reservations.”

She may even disappear, scatter into the wind, just as her brothers had years before. He’d never see her again. So fine, he might be a tad overly dramatic in the direction of thoughts, but when it came to her, he’d rather overthink than overlook something of importance.

“Should I have a word with my wife? She may shed some light on your suspicion.”

“Not necessary, I will manage on my own. I’d rather not take the chance of losing her.”

“Well, no matter what you do, at least you’ll not make more of a mess than Grey did with your sister.”

Laughter rumbled in Simon’s chest. “Perhaps it cannot hurt to receive advice from an expert.”

“Expert, my ass.”

Be as it may, Simon now had some notion to what his friend must have felt when Evelyn declined his offer of marriage and resisted his relentless pursuit.

“When did women become so damn independent?” he muttered

under his breath.

“Around the same time we allowed them to wrap us around their dainty little fingers, would be my guess.”

“So I should continue to grovel and beg?” Simon muttered, not at all appalled at the prospect.

St. Aldwyn snorted. “The most dangerous tool in the world is the one women use to seduce men, my friend. Unfortunately for mankind, they are discovering how to wield that weapon to their advantage.”

“I do not know if I can watch her be happy while I’m miserable.”

“So make her miserable.”

“That would hardly be gentlemanly.”

“No, but it will make you feel better about being miserable.”

“You are an evil man,” Simon muttered, but the notion did hold a measure of intrigue.

“No more evil than women who knowingly wield their charms to their advantage.”

Simon took a sip of his tea. He wished only for Belle to be happy. Even though the prospect of her being happy without him made his chest burn. “I daresay I could never be the cause of her unhappiness.”

“You’re as soft as a baby’s hide,” St. Aldwyn mused. “Why not inform her brothers of your indiscretions?”

Simon groaned. “The youngest already suspects. It’s Bradford I’m concerned about.”

St. Aldwyn snorted. “Why? He might demand her to marry you when he learns the truth. You’d finally have her.”

Yes, but not out of her free will.

Dammit. From the beginning, he hadn’t been imagining her breath quicken whenever he was in her presence. The way she’d steal glances at him when she believed him unobservant had been real. Even before he made his terrible blunder in the gardens, he hadn’t imagined her response to his touch. Now, after this morning, he corrected her initial mundane impression of their physical capability. But how else beyond the bedchamber could he convince her of their match? Why did she so stubbornly refuse to marry him?

“Blast it, perhaps I did drown and I’ve gone to hell.”

“If you’re in hell, the devil is a woman—a terrifying prospect. A man can be reasoned with.”

“I’ve never had trouble courting a woman before.”

“You’ve never courted a woman before,” St. Aldwyn drawled. “You’ve seduced, there is a difference.”

“Well aren’t you a bloody fountain of wisdom.”

Perhaps, Simon reflected, the crux of the problem lay in that things had always come easy for him. He’d never had any trouble with finances, drinking or gambling, like some of his peers. Indeed, he’d

lived a fairly simple life of leisure and now he felt hopelessly useless in obtaining the one thing he desired above all.

Now he'd been stripped bare of any comfort and been deposited in an uncomfortable position. Hell, he even sipped on tea and ate cheese like some old goat, completely and utterly off his game.

Perhaps this was his punishment for seducing an innocent.

And then there was De Roux, lurking about.

A thought occurred to him.

"I should take Belle out of London and to the country. There, it'd be more remote. There is a larger terrain to disappear into."

St. Aldwyn brows drew together before his lips stretched into a thin smile. "Have we not been warned to leave the matter to the more capable and equipped?"

"Screw them. They might be more equipped, but they've let her get hurt before with their *handling* of the matter."

His friend nodded. "I vote to lock the women in their rooms and let them out once the bastard is caught, but your idea does seem the more intriguing of the two."

Simon agreed. She sooner De Roux was taken care off, the sooner they could get on with their lives.

Then all that would be left to do was plan on how to tie Belle and her lyrical laughter to him.

Permanently.

Chapter 16

War. The term implied two or more parties being at odds with one another. In Belle's case, the blackguard with putrid breath wished her dead and she, in return, desired him gone of this world. Simon wished to marry her, and in return, she desired the same, but circumstances forced her to stand her ground. Her brothers insisted they keep their distance from her, where Belle wished to close that distance.

In times of war, one had to be smarter than the opposing party, or victory would be lost. But even in such times of turmoil, it was only right to take the time to reflect and maybe even enjoy a brief reprieve. It was why Belle and Jo sat gathered in her brother's study sipping brandy.

"Simon wants to marry me," Belle confessed, noting the lack of surprise on her friend's face.

She sighed.

"Oh?" Jo murmured. "I take it you declined his offer?"

Belle shot her a look. It was quite obvious that she had, or she would not be sulking, and draining her brother's prized brandy.

"Would marriage to him be so bad?" Jo asked.

Absolutely.

The hearth's fire illuminated the room in a warm glow. Outside the wind howled and the rain clattered heavily against the window, adding to Belle's brooding mood. At least in such weather, one did not have to worry about dark-cloaked figures roaming about.

"I will not marry for some misguided sense of duty."

Or any other reason.

But Belle did not delve into true reason with her friend. There were some scars one felt obliged to keep close to heart. To bare it open seemed unbearable.

“Of course not!” Jo agreed. “One should always marry for love.”

Ah yes, love.

The reason that crushed all reasons.

Belle had to give the word credit. Death and destruction had been committed in its name, assuming the history accounts were correctly interpreted. A bit maudlin in the way of thinking, even for her, but Belle wasn't inclined to feel any happiness at the moment.

“Has he seduced you?”

The question caused Belle's wide-as-saucers eyes to whip to Jo's innocent ones. “What would give you that idea?”

A knowing smile coated her face. “His insistence on the matter.”

“His instance is nothing but his deeply-rooted male honor, demanding he marry the chit he may or may not have ruined with his presence in her home.”

“Oh come now, no man's honor is rooted that deeply, not even Westfield's. So how was it? Spectacular, I presume. A man as controlled as he must be wicked indeed.”

“Jo!” Her cheeks flushed bright red, but after a moment she admitted with a sigh, “Well for one, his shock to discover my virtue still intact rather put an abrupt ending to things the first time.”

“What?” Jo sputtered on a laugh. “How utterly rude of him!”

“I nearly took his ears off.”

“And quite rightly so!” Jo agreed. “I would have gelded him if it were my husband. Men are so ill-informed sometimes.”

Jo paused. “Well, you're no virtuous woman now.”

“No, I'm not,” Belle confirmed, her face transforming from a frown to a wicked smile.

“Has he made it right?”

“Made what right?” Belle asked, innocently taking another sip.

“You know.”

Belle's cheeks turned a fiery red, which was the only response her friend apparently required.

“Aha! I knew it! I was it spectacular!” Jo exclaimed, nearly sloshing brandy out of her glass in her exuberance.

Belle rolled her eyes at her friend. Just as well that Jo made her assumptions. She would rather not delve into the details of just how much Simon had rocked her world to the core.

“That is beside the point, Jo,” Belle interrupted before her friend could comment any further. “I doubt any husband of mine would be pleased if they were to discover my hobby. Just imagine the shock and horror!”

Jo chuckled. “I daresay he would think it rather scandalous.”

“I do not imagine there exists a man in England that would allow his wife such a scandalous past time.”

Her friend seemed to consider that. "I do not know, Belle. My husband tolerates my projects."

"Barely, and even then he follows you about like some love sick pup."

"You must admit, it is kind of endearing."

That it was.

They sat in silence for a moment, curled up, sipping their golden liquid.

"My brothers will be annoyed at the depletion of their brandy supply once they return," Belle murmured.

Jo chuckled. "They would never believe their sweet sister to be responsible."

"Quinn knows that Simon is staying here."

"I didn't even know. Why would you keep it a secret?"

Belle shrugged. "He's as stubborn as a mule. Once he decides his course of action, I couldn't stop him. He moved in without even me knowing."

Jo nodded as if she accepted some truth Belle had yet to welcome. "I believe he is deeply smitten with you. I daresay the man is in love. Perhaps *that* is the reason for his fierce protectiveness."

With a scowl, Belle blurted, "He is not!"

"He did dive into a raging ocean to save you."

True.

But that did not mean he was in love. Did it?

"He will make a fine husband."

Belle choked on her brandy. "I beg your pardon! I've no intention of marrying him!"

Jo lifted a brow. "Because he is such a bore?"

She shot Jo a glare. "I am not inclined to marry any man."

Jo rested her hand on her middle. "I would like to have children. I think the rewards are worth it, dear."

"I cannot bear children, Jo." The words left her lips before she could stop them.

The weight of her revelation hung in the air between them.

Jo's eyes rounded in her delicate face. "You are certain?"

Belle sighed, swirling her brandy in her hand, watching the gold liquid move smoothly. It was too late to retract her statement now, so she continued in a soft voice, "An unfortunate consequence of my surviving my first assault. I assure you, I am very much certain of the fact."

"I'm so sorry. I cannot imagine how that must feel."

Belle waved her friends worry away. "I've accepted it a long time ago. But I cannot give an earl, or any lord for that matter, an heir. Maybe it might not matter at the beginning, but it will matter in the

end.”

The truth of her words hovered in the air, reflected in Jo’s eyes. Yet to Belle’s relief she saw no pity, only regret.

“Why have you never told us?”

Belle shrugged. “It’s not a conversation you brooch over tea. In truth, if only I knew the truth, then I could pretend that the fact of it did not exist.”

“Now that’s just silly,” Jo interjected.

“Perhaps.”

“You can always steal a baby from some horrible French spy family.”

Uncontrollable laughter spilled from Belle’s lips. “French! I would have rather thought to steal a German babe. Saints! Would that not be something?”

“If you do ever decide to snatch a babe from its poor mother’s arms, at least let me know. I would hate for you to get caught,” Jo teased.

They both laughed.

It was a ridiculous really, but the idea of it, laughable though it was, took shape in Belle’s mind. She’d have to leave for five months or there about. It will take the ton only so long before a fake pregnant ruse will become obvious. Not that she’d ever *steal* a baby, but there were other ways in obtaining infants, such as orphans. Perhaps she could have a family if she could find a husband that didn’t require his children to share his own blood.

“I know that look in your eyes.”

“What look?”

“That look that does not bode well for the rest of us.”

Belle’s lips curled.

The crushing weight of the past lifted and for the first time in a long while, she felt liberated. And with that liberation, something deep in the regions of her heart urged her not to lose hope, to not lose sight of having a family someday. He urged her to allow passion to burn brightly in her soul and right now, that passion was centered on one particular individual.

“I suppose now is as good time as any to appease any curiosity I may have.”

“You are planning on seducing Westfield again, aren’t you?”

Belle gaped at Jo.

“Oh, do not give me that look, I would have done the same, the air of danger and all that.”

Belle harrumphed. “It’s his insistence to marry that has me tiptoeing around any desirable urges.”

And that it was impossible to forget his touch, his kisses.

“Oh, posh! You have managed to hold him at bay thus far, so if that

is your only reservation I suggest you throw it to the wolves,” Jo exclaimed. “Albeit, your reluctance to marry does make sense now, but not all men require an heir. You can always marry some old dodger already equipped with an heir and spare.”

“Your eyes are sparkling with matchmaking intent again. I’m positively quivering with fear.”

“My eyes do not sparkle with matchmaking intent,” Josephine denied.

Belle gave her a look that bespoke her disbelief. “Ever since you and Evelyn married you have been lurking in the trenches of matchmaking. And Simon happens to be Evelyn’s brother. She’ll be sounding church bells the moment she learns of our indiscretion.”

“I would hardly call what you shared an indiscretion for it would imply a display of poor judgment, which I believe it was not. But I do advise that you give his proposal due consideration.”

“I have considered his proposal and I see no other way than to decline it. All I wished for was one night of magic. And all that has changed is that instead of one night, perhaps I’d like a few.”

Her friend regarded her a moment, tilting her head to the side. “But would you rather not prefer a *lifetime* of magic?”

Belle snorted. “A lifetime of magic does not exist, at least not for Simon and me.”

“The decision is yours to make Belle, but be certain it is the right one. Magic, love, life, it is what we choose to make of it and you are choosing to make nothing.”

In other words, Belle should not pass up a brilliant opportunity to create magic for concerns that ultimately may not matter.

How simple it appeared!

How simple it was not.

“You are too wise,” Belle muttered against the rim of her glass.

“Do not tell my husband that, he believes he’s the smartest of us.”

Belle chuckled, staring into the golden liquid swirling beneath her fingers.

She supposed life consisted of a series of risks taken and not taken. One could no more measure the outcome than one could predict the consequences. Marrying Simon certainly counted as a risk, but then so did remaining unmarried and continuing on her path of lonely existence. The question was which consequence could she live with.

And that, Belle truly did not know.

Chapter 17

Rebellion: where one party chose to go against the wishes of another, with or without their knowledge. And perhaps, if Belle had thought it through, she'd have come to a different conclusion that following morning.

Perhaps, if she had not woken up that very day to Simon pressed up tightly against her back, she may have felt differently on the matter. But the heat of his body, the steady rhythm of his breathing in her ear and his right arm anchoring her to his chest while the other cradled her in his embrace had, well, suffocated her.

Unaccustomed to such an invasion of her space or a restriction on her freedom, this new necessity of being cloistered inside made her itch for the outdoors. And that itch had boomed into the desire for a simple, enjoyable ride in the park. Alone. With only a footman as an escort.

Perhaps, if Simon had not left a note saying he'd be stepping out for an hour to retrieve more of his belongings, Belle would never have considered it.

Perhaps, she would not have believed it safe.

Because it wasn't.

If it had been, Belle would not currently be sprawled on the ground, gasping for breath, while blood seeped through her fingers from the fresh wound on her arm.

Still.

It *had* been such a marvelous day, full of clear skies and people buzzing about with laughter and dainty giggles. Belle had reveled in the brisk breeze caressing her face. For one precious fleeting moment, she had not felt confined or imprisoned by her circumstance, but free.

That was until two shots were fired in quick succession, their ear-

shattering thunder echoing through the park. In their wake, pandemonium broke loose. Horses reared, shouts replaced laughter, and the once-boisterous park filled with cries of fear.

Every person in the park was in an uproar. Men scoured after their horses, women wailed on the ground, and others just sat in shock. No one even noticed that Belle had fallen from her horse, one of the shots hitting her arm.

Her footman, bless his heart, fell to his knees beside her, his face draining of all color when he spotted the blood.

"My Lady-y-y, you've been shot."

Had she not been in pain, she would have rolled her eyes. "Thank you, Charles, for pointing that out. Now help me up, quickly," she gritted her teeth. "We must leave before anyone sees me bleeding all over the ground."

Because if anyone did, that would certainly mean that Simon and Jo would learn of her short-lived rebellion and be out for blood. And she would probably never see the light of day again as a result.

Charles helped her to her feet, keeping a gentle hand on her back in case she lost her balance.

"You cannot ride my lady, but I shall carry you if you cannot walk."

A bubble of laughter escaped Belle. The image of her being carried home by her heroic footman, bleeding all over him, seemed quite comical.

Remarkably, her horse had not bolted after she'd been tossed from the saddle.

"Thank you Charles, but I shall ride." When he only stared at her wide eyed, she pressed, "Come, you must help me mount."

With a reluctant nod, her footman lifted her onto her colt. She flinched in pain but managed to hold the reigns steady in one hand.

"Thank you, Charles, now hurry, we must return home post haste." And hope the man behind the gun did not follow to finish the job.

Belle did not voice that particular concern aloud, as her footman already looked ready to expire. Her main concern now was to bandage her wound and get rid of the blood-stained clothes, before word of the shooting made its way to Simon and he came barging through her chamber door.

Black spots dimmed her vision and she shut her eyes tightly before urging her horse forward. The ride home was short and nerve-racking and seemed to take forever. Charles, to her dismay, left her on top of her horse in his rush to get help.

Belle cursed, sliding down from her horse, only to fall flat on her behind. With a giggle she rose to her feet, pausing when she swayed.

Oh, botheration.

As if on cue, her maid came rushing through the front door, Charles

by her side. They came down the steps to where Belle stood, rocking on her heels.

“My Lady, come, we must get you inside and see to your wound.”

Together they snuck her into the house, heedful to remain unseen. Once inside, her maid ushered her up the staircase. They barely reached the top when a loud banging on the front door gave them pause.

“Simon,” Belle whispered in horror. “Quick Mary, wrap my arm and get me a clean jacket.”

“But My Lady, surely you can’t mean to—”

Belle held up her hand to silence her maid. “Do this for me, Mary.” She flicked her gaze to Charles. “Ring for some lemon cakes and do not let him upstairs.”

Exactly ten minutes later, Belle sauntered into the receiving room, giddy and on a cloudy haze. She presumed it was from the loss of blood, but she did not much suffer in the way of pain. Lucky for her, the bullet had only grazed her and the ache had now receded into a dull throb.

She stopped, however, at the empty room. Simon was nowhere in sight.

How odd.

Had it not been him banging on the front door? With a small shrug, she continued into the room. He’d receive word of the shooting soon enough. How foolish it had been to believe a short ride in the park would be safe.

Then it occurred to her: she was remarkably calm for someone who’d been shot. How curious. She giggled again. For a spy, one would imagine that Mister Stink Breath would be a better shot!

Wretched man.

She’d just about reached the soft lure of the chase when one of the other maids, Helen, rushed into the room. “Oh, my lady, there you are. We’ve been searching everywhere for you.”

Belle pulled a face. “I took a stroll in the garden, you must have missed me,” the lie slipped from her tongue. “What is so urgent?”

“Lord Westfield, my lady, but he has left.”

Left?

“Did he say whether he’d be back?”

The maid hesitated.

Belle raised a brow, her eyes narrowing on the young girl.

“He didn’t say, ma’am, stormed right out again. Apparently, there was a shooting in the park.”

Blast!

But he would not find her in the park, so he would most certainly

return. Lord. She needed something stiff if she was going to play the part of innocence. Better for her that he did not learn that she'd been shot at because of her own stupidity.

"Thank you, Helen. You can go about your duties."

She waited until the maid left before she quickly made her way to her brother's study, where she proceeded to pour a generous amount of brandy for her nerves. She hardly ever overindulged, finding the effects of it abhorrent. But since the return of De Roux, she'd emptied a fair share of brother's liquor cabinet.

Belle threw the contents down the back of her throat in one big gulp. Her eyes watered as the substance set all her senses aflame. There was no other word it. Almost immediately the effects settled over her, creating a comfortable mask of repose. It occurred to her in an afterthought that this might not have been the brightest idea, considering the loss of blood had already made her woozy.

However, the airy carefree clouds beneath her feet made it worth the while. The baffled urge to dance through a pasture of flowers caught her off guard, more so than the sudden desire to float on her back in a pond.

Mary entered the room at that moment, her eyes widening at the empty glass clutched in her mistress's hand. Of course, Mary most likely knew what a foolish ninny Belle had been to imbibe after her encounter in the park.

"Oh! I beg your pardon, my lady! But the Earl has returned and is asking for you. He seems quite disturbed."

Belle blinked, swaying ever so slightly on her heels.

And blinked again.

"Oh dear."

Simon paced up and down the front hall, a caged tiger ready to pounce. He'd nearly aged ten years when a missive arrived to inform him there'd been reported shots fired in the park. Of course, he'd imagined the worst. And since no one in this bloody residence could tell him where the lady of the house was, he had been certain she'd snuck out for a ride.

No sense of relief came when he hadn't found her there, only an urgent need to see for himself she was unharmed. Until he verified with his own eyes that she was indeed whole and hearty, he'd be restless and on edge. He'd give the servants three more minutes and if they did not produce her whereabouts, he'd climb up the damn walls.

"Damn it all," he muttered and marched to the drawing room. His legs refused to remain in one place, while his heart sat anchored in his throat.

He had half a mind to smash something for the sole purpose of

appeasing his anger. Anger that she may have put herself in danger. Anger at her damn brothers. Anger at the servants and their inability to produce her. Anger at himself for not keeping a closer watch on her.

The only thing keeping him from breaking down every door in this house was that no one seemed to have seen Lady Belle in the park.

His legs stopped abruptly when she appeared in the doorway, face flushed and happy.

“*Belle.*”

Her name was a ragged whisper on his lips and in two strides he was by her side. “You look pale, why are you so pale? Are you all right?”

She touched her cheeks, her eyes widening at his remark as a giggle escaped her sweet lips. “Am I paled?”

She frowned. “Pallored?”

She shook her head. “No, palled?”

Simon took a step away from her, his hawkish eyes narrowing.

Blue eyes blinked up at him, her brows drawing together. “I am above reproach and not jumbling my words in a horrid fashion.”

“What is the matter with you?” Simon asked, skepticism sharp in his voice.

“I am fine, Simon, truly.” She offered him a small smile. “I just took something for the pain.”

His eyes narrowed even more. “What pain?”

“The pain in my...head. But it’s more of a dull ache than a pain.”

Simon stared at her, certain he was overlooking something. “What exactly did you take?”

She giggled. “Do you know that ever since we have become friends, for lack of a better word, your hair is always ruffled? I rather love that about you.”

She *loved* that about him?

Without meaning to he ran his hand through his blond hair. It was not quite the color of her softer blond, but a darker version of it, thicker. “Your hair is quite nice, too.”

Why had he just said that? He cleared this throat, straightening. “What I meant to say is that you look lovely, as always.”

She erupted in giggles. “How *lovely* of you to say.”

A scowl formed on his brow. Suspicion dawned. “Are you foxed?”

“I have not shot a fox, no.”

He blinked.

Her maid chose that moment to arrive with cake, while a footman trailing behind her with tea. Both eyed their mistress from the corner of their eyes.

What in the blazes?

It was as though he'd stepped into a bad Shakespearian play.

"Oh, cakes!" Belle exclaimed happily, grabbing two lemon cakes from the tray.

Simon's jaw dropped when she began stuffing—there was no other word for it—her mouth with cake, uncaring of her audience. He swiveled to the servants, "What the devil is wrong with her?"

They both hesitated, sparing a quick glance at their mistress. "Nothing is amiss, my lord," the maid finally answered.

Simon's temper sparked, but he refrained from taking it out on the servants. It was clear Belle was unharmed, but something about this entire situation was wrong.

"Has she been drinking?"

From beside him, Belle giggled at his question, snatching another lemon cake. The servants glanced away and he took that as confirmation. He cursed, waving them away.

"This is soooo delicious. You should try some," Belle murmured with a mouth full of lemon cake.

Simon could only stare. Never in his life had he seen anything like it. Crumbs and cream coated the corners of her mouth. Her eyes were closed while she savored the cakes with a delighted smile.

"Do you not just love them?" she continued, snatching yet another lemon cake.

"I love *you*, not the damn lemon cakes," Simon growled before he could think better of it. But once the words left him he refused to take them back.

Damnation.

"Beg pardon?" Belle croaked, her hand filled with lemon cake halting mid-air, her eyes wide in wonder.

Simon's heart hammered in his chest as he waited for her reply.

"How could you not love lemon cake?"

Her lower lip quivered.

Bloody hell.

"Woman, you are foxed." *And too engrossed in those damn cakes to even comprehend my declaration.* "How much did you drink?"

She rocked back on her heels, her brow scrunching in thought. "This much," she said, indicating with her cake-smeared thumb and her pointer finger what would have been a tiny amount.

Simon snorted. "How about you just tell me what you had to drink?"

She giggled again, so out of character for her. "Why, tea of course, silly."

His jaw clenched and muscles tightened in his neck. She was determined to be difficult then, or she just foxed. For all he knew, she'd consumed the entire distillery of London.

“Tea, why of course.”

She blinked at the sarcasm he did not attempt to hide. “Why are you here? Do you not have lordy business to attend to?”

“Must have been some tea,” he muttered with a shake of his head. He touched a hand to her cheek, not liking her pallor but deciding not to press the matter. “You are too beautiful for your own good.”

She leaned into his hand and he suddenly recalled his revelation, the reason she refused to marry. “Ah, Belle, what am I to do with you?”

“Order more lemon cakes?”

On a sigh, he took hold of her arm and led her to the sofa. This, whatever this was, could not happen again.

She was a lady.

And she was being hunted by a madman.

Hell, though, if she wanted a drink, who was he to argue?

Simon watched as her mouth opened for yet another treat.

He sighed.

He’d just told the woman that he was madly in love with he loved her. Bells should be ringing, the heavens should be opening and they should be entwined in a passionate embrace, kissing.

She should have confessed she loved him back.

But no, instead she was stuffing her beautiful face with lemon cake.

Chapter 18

The following morning Belle woke up with a sour taste in her mouth and nauseating feeling in her stomach. To say she felt horrid would be quite the understatement. Her muscles ached with even the slightest bit of movement. Worse, her arm burned like the devil scorched it with his fork. With a groan, she lifted her head to squint at her surroundings and noted she'd at least made to her bedchamber without incident.

She seemed to be setting a new trend for herself.

Gah!

She did not wish to rise from the bed today. She wasn't even sure she was able to, for that matter.

An unbidden vision of Simon filled her mind and her head snapped to the pillow beside her, noting with bafflement that the telltale indents of his head were unmistakably missing. Had he not stayed in her room during the night?

Her recollections were a bit hazy but she recalled that they'd exchanged words. Again an image shimmered in her mind, words of love echoing from her lips. A sudden fluttering leaped in her heart. Another image came to mind, one of Simon standing in front her and saying that he loved her.

She shook the image away. She must have dreamt it, for there was no way he would confess he loved her. Oh, he may care for her, perhaps even a great deal, but that did not mean love. It must be her heart, playing tricks on her.

Without conscious thought, her hand brushed her wound, and she stilled. Her head whipped to her arm, her fingers coming away wet and red-stained.

"Drat," she muttered as her back shot upward, pulling away the

covers to be greeted by blood stained sheets. She'd forgotten they'd only patched the wound—rather sloppily, it would appear. Then later she'd forgotten tend to it because she had been a bit dizzy from drink. Was it any wonder she felt so groggy and her limbs so heavy? She'd been steadily losing blood during the night. Being no expert, she still knew that this was unlikely to be a good thing.

With a sigh, Belle threw the covers from her person, exposing her nightgown and the aftermath of her rebellion. To the eye, it might look as though she'd been butchered, but alas she was still very much alive.

Well, unless she had already perished and now haunted the halls of her home.

Oh, stop being so dramatic.

She attempted to sit but found her limbs reluctant to move, dizziness overtaking her. The loss of blood, no doubt. Needless to say, she needed to rid of this damning evidence before—

A curse whipped through the room.

—it was too late.

“What the bloody hell did you do?” Simon exclaimed, reaching her in three strides. “Damnation, where are you bleeding?” He asked as he kneeled at her side, his face white as snow.

“It's nothing, just a harmless scrape,” she managed to whisper.

He ignored her, inspecting the wound with care before shooting a glare her way. With unusual speed he lifted himself to his feet and stormed from her room, only to return a few moments later with a cloth that he proceeded to bind her wound with. The tick in his jaw was a telling sign of his anger.

“I've summoned the doctor.” He paused and Belle watched him visibly try and calm himself. “What happened?”

She stared helplessly back at him. “Where did you sleep last night?”

He shot her a look with a raised brow. “Do not change the subject.”

Belle cringed at the steel in his voice. His eyes were bloodshot and still she saw the calculation there, trying to map out when she could have been hurt. “Likewise,” she shot back.

He regarded her for a single moment that felt as if it spanned across lifetimes before he finally said, “I was here,” he motioned to the chair a few feet away, “I couldn't sleep, so I plied myself with liquor.”

Again, an unbidden image arose but it disappeared before she managed to grab hold of it.

“Where did you hurt yourself?” he asked again.

She wanted to lie, but only sighed in resignation. “Yesterday, in the park.”

At his expression, she almost took the words back. He looked appalled by her words, and then his wide eyes hardened. “You were

shot and you did not deem it fit to tell me? Were you even foxed? Did someone give you something for the pain?"

She shook her head. "I had brandy to calm my nerves."

He inhaled sharply. "You had brandy while you were bleeding to death?"

"I'm hardly dead, now am I?"

Her attempt at humor did not remove the betrayal from his wounded eyes. Belle let out a ragged breath. "I feel trapped, Simon, like I'm imprisoned in my own home by the people I care about. I only wanted to some space, even if only for an hour."

"I cannot believe you'd put your life in danger for a ride in the park. Damnation!"

"The park is public, I hadn't foreseen any trouble," Belle confessed.

He carefully began to put pressure on her wound. "You shall have all the freedom you desire once we've dealt with this madman."

"I'm sorry, Simon."

Simon's heart sank to the bottom of his feet, her apology ringing hollow in his ears. She had hidden the truth from him, risked her life rather than inform him she had been hurt.

Did she not trust him? No, he did not believe that, but he did believe that she found him suffocating. The notion horrified him. But could he blame her? The woman had been through much more than anyone else her age.

Christ.

He'd become stifling. And to such an extent that she'd tried to break away. No wonder she found him such a bore. The thought settled heavy on his mind. How was he to win her if she'd rather bleed to death than confide in him? Where had things gone so wrong?

It appeared he'd failed at the two things men were supposed to revel at: courtship and guardianship. In his defense, most courtships did not have vengeful spies hovering in the shadows. But at least they were both still alive. That counted for something, did it not? He had done the best with what he'd been given. And he'd been given horse dung.

"I'm sorry that you feel imprisoned," he murmured, defeated, but still managed to give her a small peck on the forehead.

Her fathomless eyes turned curious. "Why are you apologizing? I am the one in the wrong."

He shook his head and covered her hand with his, most of his anger gone. "None of this would have happened if we'd given you more space to breathe."

"That is kind of you, Simon, but I'm the one to blame. I've have been from the very beginning."

The look that entered her eyes gave him pause. It was sad, haunted even. With sudden clarity, he realized he'd never hear the words he so desperately wanted from her.

Lady Belle Middleton was never going to marry him.

He swallowed the lump that formed in his throat. Panic reared its ill-favoured head and he had to remind himself that it was not because of him, but because of something that happened in her past. Something deep and dark. Something painful.

His thoughts were interrupted by the announcement of the doctor and he rose, relinquishing the spot by Belle's side for the doctor to examine her wound.

"Doctor," he greeted with a stiff nod.

"My lord, I understand the lady has had an accident."

He nodded. "It seems shallow enough, but I suspect she's lost a lot of blood." The reprimand was back in his tone.

The doctor began to inspect the wound, murmuring under his breath.

Her stubborn eyes locked with his equally stubborn ones.

"The wound is superficial, as you said, and would probably have closed if it had not been opened it during the night."

Her eyes narrowed suddenly and her face swiveled to the doctor, her brows drawing together as if he seemed familiar to her. Now that Simon thought of it, his rough voice sounded unlike any cultured doctor he'd ever crossed paths with.

"You are no doctor," she murmured, taken aback. "You are my brother's right-hand man, the same man that saved my life."

This was news to Simon. "I sent the footman for a real doctor," he growled.

"I am a doctor and your footman came to me, as instructed by his employer."

Simon cursed.

Of course.

He would not be surprised if all the servants reported directly to Quinn. Or Bradford. And now that he gave the doctor a second look, the man appeared more a sailor than anything else. Too rough around the edges for a refined doctor.

"Will she be okay?"

The man nodded. "I don't see why not. Just keep the wound clean and don't move much for a day or so. It'll heal in no time."

"Does my brother know?" Belle whispered.

Simon harrumphed. "If he does, I hope he reddens your behind for being so reckless."

"Aye lass, he knows and sends his regards. Told me to tell you he's going to whip your derrière when he returns home."

Simon's temper sparked at that. "You tell her brother that the only one whose ass is going to be whipped is his. Are they not supposed to dispatch the bastard? I'm no longer confident in the effectiveness of their strategy."

"Who the bloody hell are you?" the other man snapped.

"Who the bloody hell are you?" Simon mocked.

"I'm—"

"Boys, please," Belle interrupted. "We cannot fight amongst ourselves when there is a greater fight we must save our strength for."

Simon studied the other man, not much older than himself before he held out his hand and grudgingly replied. "Simon Tremaine, no offense meant."

"John Cameron. None taken," he said, shaking Simon's hand in a vice grip. "She's always been a stubborn one."

"I'm right here, you brutes."

The doctor-sailor chuckled and bid his goodbye, leaving Simon alone once again with Belle. They stared at each other, both at a loss for words. Her inability to confide in him caused a rift between them and Simon did not know how to cross it.

"Are there any other secrets I should know?"

"Whatever secrets I may have are still mine to keep."

"The world is so much simpler without secrets," he muttered.

"And you have none, I take it?"

"I probably have one or two, but not any that I keep so tightly tucked away," he paused, wanting to say so much more but instead replied, "I will leave you to rest."

Shoulders heavy, he turned leave, but her words stopped him just as he reached the door.

"I hired a mercenary to kill De Roux, the night before our first meeting."

Simon whirled, unable to keep the shock from his expression. "You did what?"

Her lips twitched. "I paid him all my savings."

Simon blinked. "All of your savings?"

"Do not give me that tone. I was not in my right mind."

Simon spared her a look that said he clearly agreed. "So he was a fraud."

Her small shoulders lifted in a shrug. "It turned out he was one of Edgar's men. He was toying with me, the bastard."

Simon crossed the distance and sat down on the bed beside Belle. God, but he loved this woman. Even now, after she'd been shot, lied to him and risked dying of blood loss, all so that she did not have to tell him the truth. Yes, he loved her, even though she did not recall his confession.

Still, she'd shared this secret. It was a start. A small start, but a start nonetheless.

"Thank you for sharing that. I cannot imagine how hard it must have been to do so. But if you ever do anything like that again, I will take you over my knee and blister your behind."

Her smile widened. "I did not know what else to do."

His lips thinned. "You could have come to me. I truly do not know how you have survived this long on your own."

"I've never been alone. I've always had Evelyn and Jo and now my brothers have returned."

And me.

But he did not voice it. For now, it was best to let sleeping dogs lie. "De Roux has proven a strong adversary, but he's grown restless and as a result, became reckless. The stunt in the park proved that much."

"He's grown bold," Belle agreed. "I believe he will not wait for me to leave the house next time. But I shall be ready."

Simon did not like the sound of that. In fact, his heart leaped in fierce denial. Perhaps the time had come to change the playing field.

A rather crazy idea began to form in his mind and neither his sense of honor nor his conscience spoke up against it, which meant he was likely about to embark on something ridiculously rash. But then, rash and foolish fit in rather nicely with *her* rash and foolish actions. Perhaps to win her, he had to pattern himself after her.

"I see that you will remain stubborn to the bitter end."

"I believe I have my brothers to thank for that."

Simon gave a loud snort.

After learning her brothers were spies, he'd come to suspect that the sudden death of her parents and the abrupt departure of her siblings had little to do with grief, but had been more along the ways of spy versus spy. It had never sat right with him that her brothers would abandon their sister, who was barely of age.

"You have a different opinion?" she asked sweetly.

"Stubbornness is not all that runs your family, my dear."

No, he had a sneaky suspicion that Belle's ancestry possessed a long list of men working for the Crown. She'd not been thrust into the world of spying but been born into it. That may be why De Roux had singled her out from the beginning, why it had been her he engaged and not another unsuspecting miss.

He could not tell her that now, however. By saint's, she'd most likely try her hand at becoming one. And then she'd truly never marry him.

The rich sound of her laughter reached his ears. "I suppose you are right, stubbornness is but one of our traits. Are you still angry?"

"No."

“I don’t believe you.”

He smiled at that. “You should rest, my dear, gain your strength back,” he murmured when her eyes started to drift shut.

“I am a bit exhausted. Perhaps I shall close my eyes for a bit.”

Simon kissed her nose. Already her breathing had become shallow as fatigue drew her off into a peaceful slumber.

Ever so softly that the words barely left his tongue, he whispered, “I love you.”

Chapter 19

The most unusual of circumstances usually came in the form of well-intentioned plans gone awry. Or at least, that was always how Simon had thought of it. He could envision the desired outcome and then plot and plan to manipulate the current situation at hand to develop the required result. Yet, at times—much like the time he'd plotted to bring together Grey and Evelyn—the desired result just refused to be...well, desired and he would find himself in an unusual spot.

An unusual outcome was not, however, what he had in mind when he angled his head toward his friend later that day and said, quite confidently, "I have a plan."

"I thought we established long ago that your plans never work," St. Aldwyn murmured with a raised brow.

They were seated in Bradford's study, polishing an absurdly expensive bottle cognac that they'd found in the man's bottom desk drawer. Belle's brother enjoyed the taste of the expensive stuff.

Belle and Lady Josephine were reading in the library, each sporting a French—*French*—flintlock pistol, which Belle had dug out from the attic some hours ago. Though, irony aside, it should not have come as a surprise that the Middletons were armed to the teeth with ancient weaponry.

They had Quinn to thank for the discovery, since he'd sent a missive with a map of the attic, practically demanding Simon take better care of his sister.

"Be that as it may, this plan is fool-proof."

"Then, by all means, let us hear it."

Simon ignored the sarcasm lacing St. Aldwyn's words and replied, "I will abscond with Lady Belle and then I will marry her."

St. Aldwyn choked on his brandy. "Abscond?"

“Grand, is it not?”

“Is that even a plan? Does a plan not contain more...” he tapped his finger to his chin, “what is the word? Oh yes, *details*?”

“Do not be such a sour puss.”

“I thought you did not want to *force* the issue.”

“I changed my mind.”

St. Aldwyn shrugged. “It explains the spirits. Perhaps you should have saved it for after your plan succeeded.”

“If my plan does not succeed, it would have been a consolation bottle. I’d rather enjoy it while I’m still optimistic.”

Damien wiped the brandy from his chin, chuckling. “You have completely lost your marbles. Alas, if you *abscond* with Lady Belle, my wife will serve my balls on her silver china.”

“She will get over it.”

“Forgive me if I don’t share your enthusiasm.”

“It will solve most of our problems and your wife should be ecstatic, since my sister told me she’s been itching for some matchmaking. And if Belle is my wife, then we can divert our attention on catching De Roux, whereas now she continues to remain in harm’s way.”

“Because she is not married to you?” St. Aldwyn murmured.

“Correct.”

“And your almighty title will shield her from De Roux out of its sheer grandness?”

“Not exactly,” Simon bit out with a scowl.

“So you kidnap—my apologies, *abscond* with the chit and marry her, but what exactly does that solve except that it gives you an eternity of being leg-shackled to a woman that will rant and rave about her lack of choice in the matter?”

“As her husband, there is no need for me to skulk about her home in secret in an attempt to protect her. I can be by her side in a more visible way. Have you not been listening to anything I’ve said?”

“Oh, I heard you spouting all sorts of ridiculous excuses to marry her. There are less theatrical ways, such as a good old courting, but then again, they aren’t nearly as entertaining.”

Simon shot him a glare.

They were still no closer to catching De Roux and that worried him. Not to mention Belle had lied to him about being injured.

He would never forget the utter helplessness that had overcome him at her deception. So she hadn’t lied to him outright, but she’d still neglected to inform him of what transpired. At first, he’d been furious, and then concern had replaced anger and finally, determination had set in. It had become quite clear that to remain in London would be impossible. The public incident in the park proved as much. He refused to let the woman he loved die from her own foolishness.

"She will be safer once she is married."

"And you will be married, also."

He cast his friend a droll stare. "Have you forgotten that you are married?"

St. Aldwyn waived his comment aside with the flick of his hand. "I had to get married, you know, love and all that."

Well, hell.

"I care for her."

I'm madly in love.

"I care for her a great deal."

Ridiculously in love.

"And she cares for you?" his friend asked.

"Hopelessly in love with me. I just must convince her of it."

"Ah, I recall my wife saying Lady Belle believed you a bore."

Simon flushed. "I am not a bore," he growled.

St. Aldwyn lifted his hand in a placating manner. "I did not say you were. A bit eccentric at times, yes, but not a bore."

"She will learn soon enough I'm anything but a bore. But, for now, she requires the protection of a husband. Her brothers cannot be present and De Roux is lurking about London. As her husband, I can protect her better. As a countess, her death will attract more attention, more eyes."

"And why not just inform the lady of your plan?"

Simon snorted. "She'd shackle herself to a rock beneath the ocean before she ties the noose around her freedom."

"If I recall correctly, Evelyn and Jo felt the same way. Look at them now, all happy with their nooses. There is a compromise to be found."

Compromise.

Unfortunately, it wasn't as easy as that. Simon was sure Belle's reservations ran too deep to just accept something she'd spent years fighting and suppressing. "They managed to fall in love with the two of you."

"And I still gawk in wonder at my wife every day, waiting for her to realize what she's done."

Simon chuckled.

"What about De Roux? He may follow you if you abscond with the lady."

"My plan is not without risk or danger. However, as I said, dispatching an earl's wife brings more complications than a lady 'disappearing' on a whim, which is what I'm sure De Roux would try to make it look like. Especially since her damn brothers are notorious wanderers in the eyes of the ton."

"I wonder what those two hellions will say when you carry their sister off into the sunset," St. Aldwyn chuckled, sounding pleased at

the prospect of irking them.

“Those hellions are to be my brothers-in-law.”

What will they say about his plan? They’d most likely attempt to stop him if they learned of it. Luckily for him, they were off doing Christ knows what Christ knows where.

Was this what it meant to love? Would he forever feel this madness within him, this concern where she was concerned? Would she understand that once she became his wife, she’d never have to face anything alone again?

“Bloody hell man, you’ve got the fever bad.”

“I beg your pardon? Fever?” Simon asked surprised.

“I’d know that look anywhere. It’s on Grey’s face every time he looks at his wife. Good god, do *I* have that look?” St. Aldwyn asked appalled.

“Do you love your wife?”

“Of course.”

“Then you have the look,” Simon shot back.

“Marvelous. The rocks just keep piling on my long-fought-for reputation,” St. Aldwyn complained.

“I am certain you will survive your tattered repute.”

“Doubtful. So, you love the chit. Have you confessed your adoration to the lady?” St. Aldwyn drawled.

“It’s not something you blurt over a cup of tea.”

Lemon cakes, though, certainly.

“Perhaps, but it’s not something you blurt over a good old absconding either. If I have any splendid advice left to give, it would be to vomit out the words now and not at another unsuspecting, ill-opportune time.”

Hell.

“Sound advice my friend, but now is *not* the most opportune time.”

St. Aldwyn pressed his lips together. “If you haven’t told her, how can you know it’s not the perfect time?”

“Stop being such a wise clod.”

But as Simon mulled over St. Aldwyn’s words, he rather thought his friend had a point. The fact remained, he had already blurted a confession of love, but she’d misinterpreted the entire context.

Ill-timed, indeed.

“So let us hear this plan of yours to secure the lovely lady as your wife, once again,” St. Aldwyn drawled, crossing one leg over the other. “And though I love the idea of infuriating the hellions, what *will* you do about those brothers of hers who are lurking about in the shadows? I take it they are not party to your plan?”

“They would flog me if they knew—a damn nuisance that—which is why I won’t be mentioning it to them.”

In truth, Simon still did not quite understand where in his and Belle's world they would fit in. But considering they were soon to become his family, he supposed he'd have to tolerate them however they came.

"And what of the Shaws?"

"Don't rightly care what they think about it."

"Yes, I agree. I would have cut all ties if it weren't that my wife has taken a fancy to their friendship."

Simon snorted.

He'd never admit it, but every time Belle spoke to one of the brothers, he had to tamp down a jealousy that set his nerves on edge. They were mountains and ladies swooned whenever they found themselves in their presence. Gentlemen seemed to give them a wide margin as if the wrath of hell would come down on anyone who spoke their names. He did owe a debt to James, though, for saving Belle from drowning. For that, he'd tolerate them within reason.

"It happens tonight."

St. Aldwyn raised an infuriating dark brow. "Not one for patience, I see."

Simon scowled at that. "The sooner the better. I'll have a few days to do some courting—I'm not a complete brute."

"I suppose there is not much one can do but talk for three days in a carriage. Are you ready to lay bare your heart?"

Simon ignored his sarcasm. He'd have plenty of time to convince her that they'd be an excellent match. He'd convince her that not only did he love her but he was determined to devote all of his days to making her happy.

"What do you need me to do?"

"Keep your wife from charging to her friend's rescue for a few days."

St. Aldwyn chuckled. "You do not know my wife very well. Come to think of it, my wife may even be delighted at the news."

"Well then, let us hope for that outcome."

"And De Roux?"

Simon turned serious. "You must keep the guise that she is still in residence. If we are lucky, we shall pull the wool over his eyes, if not, I suspect I'll have much more than the likes of him to contend with on our tail anyway."

"Why not take your screaming bride abroad for a honeymoon?"

Simon heaved a sigh. "I would, but she'd never leave her friends to face what she believes is her own mess."

St. Aldwyn nodded. "These women we've chosen are as headstrong as they come."

Something told him that neither of them would have chosen any

differently. “Somehow I cannot see you with a timid miss that insists on keeping her own quarters.”

St. Aldwyn flinched. “That would be my worst nightmare.”

Simon chuckled. Indeed.

In about three hours, Belle would be sound asleep and his plan would be set in motion. He would not stop until she belonged to him completely—in every sense of the word. It may take time, but he was confident he’d steal her heart, just as he was about temporarily to steal her freedom.

Though he knew he might get clogged over the head for his effort.

Chapter 20

That night Belle entered her bedchambers exhausted and, quite frankly, miserable. Her eyes flicked to the table where her sketches took up most of the space. It felt like days since she last touched a pencil, and her fingers were itching to draw. Her mind, however, felt burdened and refused to be used for creative means.

Her blue eyes swept her room, sentiment clogging her throat.

I must leave it all behind.

Up till now, Quinn and Bradford had failed to apprehend De Roux and with each passing moment, the threat of danger became more imminent. She could not, in all good conscience, allow her friends continue to live in fear because of her.

It was time to scatter.

Once De Roux got wind of her disappearance, he'd leave in search of her. She'd then send word to her brothers and would join them in the fight together. They had left her in the dark for long enough. The time had come to finally be reunited with her family, even if it meant she must leave her friends behind.

The soft scraping of nails on the floorboard alerted Belle of Charlemagne, who moments later came traipsing into her room, his eyes big in his narrow face as he watched her. "Do not worry Char, Jo will take excellent care of you."

At his whine, she stroked the soft fur on his neck, tickling his ears. "I'll miss you, too, but one day we shall be reunited again."

With the slight flick of her hand, she ran her finger lightly over her sketches. She'd miss refashioning her sketches into beautiful cloth, as well.

With a sigh, her eyes darted to her bed, which had never looked so inviting. What she wouldn't give to strip from her clothes and fall into

the plush pillows. But first, a bath.

Simon would soon settle in for the night, whether in the armchair or beside her and while she wanted nothing more than to surrender to the pull of her exhaustion, this may be the last time she'd see him in a while, perhaps even forever.

Her heart ached at the thought.

The weight of her decision came swift and unwanted, her breath hitching in response. This may be the last chance she'd ever get to run her fingers through his hair, to kiss the arch of his brow. The last night she could stare into his eyes, engage his ire, and entice a smile. Her heart drummed against her chest.

She would bathe until the water did not hold a drop of warmth and hoped he arrived by then. He was going to be furious with her for leaving. But with time he'd come to understand her decision and maybe even forgive her. She'd refused him enough times for him to grasp that she did not envision a future for them together.

"Oh Belle, what are you doing?" she whispered on a sigh.

She did not want to go. She was not ready to leave him or her life here. In the short time since De Roux's return, Simon had come to truly mean something to her; they'd grown closer than she had ever allowed any man to get to her and she loathed breaking that bond.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered into the chill night air. "This was never how I imagined it would end."

Well, no one could ever claim she had not lived a life of scandal, intrigue and suspense. Granted, not Simon or the return of De Roux had been part of her plan. She'd only dreamed of a bit of wildness and low-cut gowns. Now, a madman nipped at her heels along with a man she suspected she'd fallen hopelessly in love with.

Damn, this situation to Hades.

She'd love nothing more than to bury that that Frenchman fifteen feet beneath the ground.

A knock on her door signaled the arrival of her maids and she stood lost in thought as they scurried around her to prepare her bath. It was only when they left that she Belle spotted a cup of steaming hot milk on the nightstand. Bemused by their consideration, she made her way to the inviting substance. It was her favorite night time drink, as it happened.

Sinking onto the edge of her bed, she decided she might as well enjoy her milk while it was still warm.

What a day of discovery it had been! Who'd have thought her family owned an attic filled with ancient pistols and weaponry. Some of them Belle had recognized, some of them so old one could only wonder at their origin.

Other than that, her day had been normal enough. She'd woken up

early, as usual, not to sketch like most mornings, and certainly not to stare at the blank paper with nothing but turmoil stewing in her mind. No, she's woken to read a copy of *Lady Sugar Finds Love*, a gift from Evelyn, as it were.

It had been just as well since she'd woken up to an empty room yet again, since Simon had not touched her in an intimate manner after he discovered she'd been shot, but this time the unmistakable imprint of his body beside her had soothed her disappointment.

In any case, though she was not much of a reader, Belle had to admit it was thoroughly entertaining. Lady Sugar, being born in unfortunate circumstances had risen above it in the most bizarre of ways. And she fell in love in quite a spectacular fashion. Belle enjoyed those parts the most.

What would Lady Sugar do in her circumstance? Lure her enemy out into an abandoned meadow and set wild dogs on him, no doubt. She'd not have run away in the midst of a battle. No, she'd have pursued her attacker.

How unlucky that Belle was not a fictional character.

It had been in the chaos in the wake of the shooting in the park that the axis of her world had tilted.

It was not the brutal truth that she could have died or that she'd survived yet another attempt on her life from her enemy. It had not been the sight of the sticky red wetness splattered all over the sleeve of her gown, either.

But somehow, as never before, the threat had become almost unbearably real. What if it hadn't been *her* gown? But Jo's? What if it had been Simon?

In that moment, her path had become clear.

The warm milk soothed her as she took a sip, sighing in pleasure. It always managed to make her feel better. After another sip, Belle wished she'd never attended the blasted ball, the one where the sickening fragrance of her nemesis had alerted her of his return.

Would it even have mattered?

The fatigue of her body tugged at her and it had begun to become difficult to keep her eyes open. Nothing a relaxing bath would not fix. Finishing her milk, Belle moved to stand, only, her feet refused to move. She glanced down at them with a frown.

"Move feet," she muttered their way.

Still, they remain rooted to the ground.

Her eyes flicked to the bath and then back down to her unmoving limbs. "It isn't very far."

Wait, why am I talking to my feet?

Her knees buckled the same time she reached forward, arms outstretched towards the rim of the bath. She fell to the ground with a

thud, the glass tumbling from her grasp.

What was wrong with her?

Panic rose and she tried to drag her body back up the bed. Her movements were slow, drowsy even and her legs wouldn't move, though her arms still worked.

A tingling sensation crawled from her shoulders down to her fingers, leaving numbness in their wake. Her breathing became labored. Had she been poisoned? Her eyes darted to the empty cup in horror. *No*.

She tried to call out Simon's name, but no sound escaped her lungs. With resigned regret, Belle rested her cheek on the cold floor. Fighting the poison would only make it worse. She must preserve her strength to give her maid time to find her, and hopefully, save her.

From her angle on the ground, Belle could see the blasted cup on the floor, mocking her.

Black spots filled her vision.

It was then that she saw the door open. Feet paused in the doorway, seconds before they rushed to her. Strong hands lifted her into even stronger arms.

"Belle?"

She heard her name as if from a distance—a bittersweet sound. The eerie sensation of weightlessness engulfed her as she was lifted from the ground and deposited on the bed.

Shutting her eyes, she drifted away on the peaceful lure of sleep.

Simon cursed when Belle lost consciousness. He urgently felt for her pulse, nearly collapsing from relief when the steady, rhythmical beat beneath his fingers signaled life.

"What the bloody hell did you give her?" He heard St. Aldwyn's incredulous voice behind him.

"I cannot say," Simon muttered in a grave tone. "I bought it from a gypsy."

"You did what?"

"He assured me it was safe and would only put her to sleep."

"Laudanum would have done the trick."

"She'd have tasted it in her milk. The concoction the gypsy gave me was sweet."

St. Aldwyn shook his head, "Nothing says I love you like 'my apologies for almost killing you, dear, while attempting to kidnap you and force you into matrimony.'"

"Shut up."

Simon gathered Belle into his arms, placing a soft kiss on her forehead. He turned toward the doorway, but stopped when he caught sight of St. Aldwyn's sly smile.

“Move out of my way.”

“In a moment, I want to commit this image to memory.”

“What is so funny?”

“My best friend kidnapping the woman he loves, after rendering her unconscious with a potion he bought from a gypsy.”

Simon shoved past Damien, careful not to jar Belle. He would have punched his friend if he hadn’t been holding her. Of course, he was right. He supposed his behavior was a bit out of character but did love not make you do things you would not normally do?

He glanced down at Belle’s beautiful face. She was so quiet, so still, that it disturbed him. He kept his arm in such a position so that his fingers remained on her pulse—just to make sure nothing was amiss.

Simon swiftly made his way through the now familiar halls of her home careful to stay clear of any light. When they reached the servant’s entrance, he entered the awaiting carriage without pause, arranging Belle comfortably on his lap.

Later, when she woke, all hell would break loose, but Simon was confident he could manage the situation, and her.

St. Aldwyn appeared at the carriage door.

“Good luck old chap, I am rooting that she allows you to remain breathing.”

Simon nodded. “As am I. You will hold off the cavalry?”

St. Aldwyn nodded. “I have a few tricks up my breeches, and the keys to all the closets,” he drawled, then waggled his eyebrows. “Or the kitchen, wouldn’t want to starve my wife to death.”

Simon chuckled. “Godspeed.”

And with that, his friend shut the door and rapped it on the side. Moments later, the carriage shot forward, taking him to what would hopefully *not* be the death of him.

Chapter 21

Belle woke up to the sounds of squeaking carriage wheels rolling over a dirt road and the thudding of hooves. A groan escaped her parted lips when she arched her back and her muscles disapproved of the action.

What on earth?

She opened one eye, squinting to make sense of her surroundings.

Simon sat across from her, his eyes shut.

What on earth? The words repeated in her head.

She tried to recall how she got here, but her mind appeared to be a bit vague on the events. However, she did recall a warm sweetened cup of milk.

They weren't restrained, which meant however she got here, at least it had not been against her will.

At least, not entirely.

Her other eye popped open and the pair narrowed on the silent form sitting across from her. A day's growth of whiskers coated his jaw and tired lines had settled in the corners of his eyes. Even the line of his mouth was pulled thinner than usual.

Her eyes flickered to the snug blanket that had been tucked tightly around her. Why would he think to keep her warm, except if they were traveling far away from home?

Suspicion bloomed.

"What did you do?"

At her hoarse whisper, his eyes opened, alert, and settled on her stormy ones. Weariness replaced...fear?

He said nothing, only cleared his throat and shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Her suspicion strengthened to the point of panic.

"Where are you taking me?" Belle asked, more urgently this time.

She must not have sounded quite like herself for concern flared in his gaze. Something settled in her mind and through the haze of her fog-filled head, a distant memory took form: the determination that settled in his gaze when she told him she'd not marry him.

"We are on our way to Scotland. As for what I am doing, I believe they call it kidnapping."

Her brows rose at his explanation. "Why would you kidnap me?"

But some part of her already knew the answer.

"Why to marry you, of course."

Belle blinked up at Simon, her mind refusing to capture the significance of his words. Marry her? He must be delusional. The notion was too ridiculous to contemplate, and yet, here she was, tucked away in his carriage without so much as a chaperone.

Belle straightened.

The milk.

She shot him a glare.

"You drugged me? Even after I made my wishes clear?" Her voice sharp and incredulous; she was unable to fully believe that he was capable of it.

He had the grace to look sheepish when he answered. "I laced your milk with a sleeping potion."

Belle heard the words but comprehension seemed slow to arrive. He had done *what*?

"We are traveling alone," she accused as her eyes swept the carriage again, noting for the first time more blankets stacked beside Simon and hot bricks on the ground at her feet for warmth.

He nodded. "I left a note on your pillow. Your aunt will know by morning that you eloped with me."

Eloped?

As in marry?

As in marry him?

Yes, Belle. He said as much—twice! Gather your wits!

Her throat tightened. This could not be happening. Surely this couldn't be happening. A dream, this *must* be a dream.

Yet even as she thought it, she wondered how she'd not anticipated this rash action on his part.

"Have you lost your mind?"

"You lied to me," he simply replied.

That brought her up short. "I beg your pardon?"

"You were shot, and then you lied."

So that had been the last straw, the one to push him over the edge.

She swallowed, her throat suddenly dry.

Simon, apparently noting the action, handed her a canteen of water. "Here."

She took the flask with shaky hands and drank a few sips before handing back the canteen.

This was unacceptable.

She could not marry him, no matter what. But how to defuse the situation?

"I was only grazed, hardly shot," she began.

"You were shot at," Simon growled. "And I did not even know! You never thought to inform me, even though you had opportunity enough. You chose to risk death over appraising me of events."

Belle supposed she could not argue the claim. It was true. Guilt poked her in the chest. She'd not thought of it like that, only believed it was best at the time.

"I'm sorry, Simon. But I still cannot marry you."

But he wasn't finished.

"You were delirious from blood loss, and you let me think you were foxed!" Simon raised his voice. "How could you do that?"

"Well, I was pickled, somewhat, so that was not a complete lie."

"That is not the point!"

Memories began to filter through her mind of that day. Giggling. She recalled too much giggling.

"That day is a bit hazy. I was in shock, Simon. I cannot recall much after leaving the park. Besides, I should hardly be punished for a lie with marriage."

A sudden memory of her stuffing her mouth with lemon cake surfaced and she almost groaned. What a fright she must have appeared.

"Punished with marriage?" He paused momentarily at that. "Nonetheless, the point here remains clear. I cannot protect you the way you require protection unless we marry."

She was listening to Simon, but another memory tried to push through to the surface. She recalled him standing over her and...

"It is not your place to protect me," she absentmindedly replied, focusing in on the memory.

The sharp inhale of his breath drew her eyes to him once more. The image flitted away.

"The hell it is not!"

"Simon, that night in the garden and the other..." she cleared her throat, "They were a mistake. We should never have happened. You don't need to fulfill any duty toward me."

"Is that what you think?" His words were a soft whisper now.

"I—I do not know what to think, half of the time."

A ragged sigh tore from his chest. "I am terrified for you, Belle. This is not about duty."

"That is still no reason to marry. My brothers are here, perhaps not

in eyesight, but close.”

“A spy is hell bent on killing you and hell if I know what your brothers are actually doing about it.”

“I should never have gone to the park, another mistake on my part. He cannot get close if I remain in the shadows and don’t step into the light.” But even as Belle said it, uncertainty stirred in her heart.

Simon spotted it. “We are getting married and that is final.”

She sat up straighter. “Even if you do manage to drag me down to the altar, while I shout obscenities I might add, I still have to *voluntarily* say yes. You cannot force my consent.”

His eyes asked her, ‘*Are you certain about that?*’ while his hand raked through his blonde mane. “We will get married, even if I have to hold the blacksmith at gunpoint. I suggest you get used to my face, darling, you’ll be seeing it for the remainder of your life,” he bit out rather bitterly.

“You imagine that would be a hardship.”

He gave a rueful laugh. “You have not made it a secret that I’m not good enough to be your husband. Apparently, I’m only worthy of relieving you of your virtue.”

Belle gasped in outrage. “I never said that!”

“You’ve made your grievances quite clear. So I can only deduce that you can never come to love an earl like me.”

An earl like him? Hah!

But the word “love” brought her up short.

Love.

The earlier image of him standing before her, mouthing something while she enjoyed her lemon cakes suddenly invaded her mind.

I love you, not the damn lemon cakes.

Her heart stopped.

“You said you loved me,” Belle murmured, the memory now so clear in her mind that she almost choked on it.

He stilled, weary emerald eyes roaming her face, taking in every small nuisance and registering the slight twitch in her eye.

Belle squirmed under his gaze, wishing she hadn’t blurted that out. But the memory had caught her so off guard, how was she meant to react to that? By the tick in his jaw, she estimated her reaction was not the desired one.

“Yes, I may have declared something of the sort while you were too preoccupied with cake and bleeding to death,” he snapped.

In hindsight, she may not have had the best timing in the world.

“Simon,” she started but paused when she saw him stiffen at her placating tone.

Simon was unlike any man she’d ever met, by no means was he a rake or the brooding sort. Always ready with a smile and a gentleman

in every sense of the word, he also possessed a slightly wild imagination. In short, he was wonderful and she didn't know what to do with him.

Her hands trembled with uncertainty and her mind protested to what her heart was determined to utter. Yet if she confessed her true feelings and how much she desired to call him her own, he'd never let her go. She'd even wager he'd move mountains to claim her, which would ultimately end in resentment.

Just tell him the truth, her traitorous inner voice counseled in desperation.

No, she whispered back.

"I cannot marry you."

An array of emotions passed over his face before a blank mask cleared away all expression. But she'd seen enough. Hurt. Disappointment. Betrayal. Desperation. And then calm. It was painful to watch and she ached all the more for it.

I love you, too.

He leaned forward, attempting to hide the slight tremble of his hands. "You need protection, Belle. Your brothers aren't here and you have a madman on your tail that wants to kill you. I will be able to protect you better if you are my wife."

Belle shivered at the word "wife."

It would not be difficult to imagine being his wife. In fact, it was rather easy. Too easy. She must make him grasp the finality of her decision.

Belle shook her head, her eyes pleading him to understand. "Marriage will only put you in more danger. I cannot allow that. I can take care of myself."

He scoffed, but said, "If you marry me you won't have to. I'll share your burden and protect you in all ways and in all things."

"Simon—"

"If you are worried I'll dictate your life, don't be. It is not my wish to change who you are. We will be equals, partners in marriage."

Belle believed him. It sounded like heaven, in fact, which made it all the more painful to let go. If there were ever a man to pick for her husband, even before this mess with De Roux, she'd have picked him. And she'd have loved him until the end.

"You don't understand, perhaps you never will. I *cannot* marry you, Simon."

He settled back in his seat, his eyes fathomless as he regarded her. The stubborn set of his jaw was the only sign of his unyielding resolve. "Why do you run away from me, from us? I'll not believe you do not feel the same connection I do."

Arms settling over her chest, she tilted her chin upward. "There are

some things even I cannot change, no matter how much I may wish to."

"A more stubborn woman I've yet to meet. You. Love. Me." Leaning forward, his gaze lit with truth, he dared her to deny it. "And I am hopelessly in love with you."

At her small gasp, he continued. "I've told myself your denial does not matter, but it pains me, truly pains me. I want your heart. I want to hear you say the words. But even if that never occurs, I still want you safe."

At a loss for words, her heart still hammering at his declaration, Belle could only stare at him, wide-eyed.

"I will not let anything happen to you. Even if it means you shall hate me, you shall at least be alive to do so."

Belle closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Does Jo know what you've done?" she asked.

His shoulders lifted in a shrug. "I wager if she hasn't yet, she will learn of it soon enough."

Belle looked away. That provided no comfort, not even a slither of hope. They would never reach her in time, should they even attempt to rescue her from this madness.

No matter, she'd remove herself from his misguided clutches. Having survived death twice now, she figured she'd manage to outmaneuver an earl.

Belle snuck a peak at Simon, quickly averting her gaze when she found him staring at her with a sad droop in the set of his shoulders that hadn't been there moments ago.

She admitted to herself that she never could quite catch her breath every time she looked at him. There was something about him, something that made her want to throw caution to the wind and embrace the life she never imagined she'd have.

But he was an earl, and an earl required an heir. He might overlook her barrenness now, in the face of danger and in the bright eyes of love, but when the danger passed, when love settled into a less-passionate thing, all that would remain was the truth of what he'd sacrificed in a moment of passion.

He'd have no sons or daughters of his own. Never hear the laughter of children in his home. Never have anyone to carry on his title or to dote on him in his old age. She *knew* what that future felt like and she could spare him that. If she gave into him now, he'd only ever have her, then regret, and, eventually, resentment. And that—that she could not bear.

Better to love him only from afar, better to see him truly happy someday when he moved on from her, then to have him grow to hate her and their life together.

Resolved, she turned her attention to his plan, which had a few holes in it. Such as her aunt. She would never find the note. Her maid would, and she'd destroy it, knowing that if her mistress had eloped, Belle would have at the very least informed her. Since her maid was aware of her persona of Madam De La Frey, she knew to be discreet in any matters involving Belle.

"We are getting married. That is the end of it," Simon said as if he could hear her thoughts.

Belle did not glance his way but continued to stare out of the window.

"We shall see about that," she replied, her whisper barely audible.

Chapter 22

Belle waited until their driver vanished into the Twin Brothers Inn before she jumped from the carriage and dashed in a different direction. She only had moments before Simon, already inside securing their luncheon, would notice the driver had left his post and would rush back outside himself. Though Gretna Green was famous for its elopements, it was still just a tiny village, consisting of only a few constructions.

She headed for the only immediate shelter in sight, which happened to be a coach a few feet away from where they halted. A pang in her chest stalled her for a moment and she glanced over her shoulder with longing and regret.

Really, what did Simon expect? That she would just allow herself to be drugged and kidnapped? That she would be passive about something in which they so fervently disagreed? This was not the Middle Ages. Men did not throw women over their shoulders and ravish them in caves. These were modern times and she refused to give in to such barbaric antics. No matter how endearing the sentiment.

The coach was the perfect place to hide and without further thought she threw open the door and jumped in, startling two young lovers out of their embrace.

“My apologies. Please do not stop on my account,” Belle murmured, unconcerned that there were occupants in the coach. In fact, it suited her purpose much better. Now, no unsuspecting couple would discover their coach had been appropriated—they were already aware of her. And perhaps they’d prove interesting company on her journey home.

The couple continued to stare at her eyes wide.

Belle raised a brow. "If you do not mind, I will just wait here for a while."

That brought them out of their shock.

"Of course," the lady replied, a delighted smile spreading across her face. "I am Lady Lucinda Albright and this is Lord Beaverstoke."

"It's a pleasure to meet you both, I am—"

"You are Lady Belle Middleton, yes?" Lucinda replied with obvious excitement. "We know who you are. You're quite famous."

Taken aback, Belle regarded them with suspicion.

Famous?

Surely not.

She studied the couple with newfound interest. Lady Lucinda bubbled with merriment, her green eyes sparkling with mischief. Wild, dark curls framed her face in direct contrast to Lord Beaverstoke's thinning light hair. A pretty girl made even more so by her partner. It was clear she outshone him in every way, casting him into the shadows. But by the looks of the young lord, he may even prefer it that way.

Her gaze took him in, not certain she'd ever heard or seen him before. He was quite unremarkable, with his mouse-colored hair, pointy nose, and thin lips. Perched on said nose were small glasses, almost too small for his long, pointy face.

Wait...a memory flitted through her mind. A rumor of a clumsy lord that fell over his own feet when he brought his lady love roses. The thorns of the roses scratched his face during his tumble as he had forgotten to have them removed. Could this be that couple?

"You must have me confused with someone else, Lady Lucinda. I'm hardly famous."

"Oh, but you are! You are acquainted with the most notorious rakes in London," Lucinda whispered scandalized. "What's more, your friends married two of those rakes!"

Belle blinked at the couple sitting across from her at a loss for words.

Lord Beaverstoke remained silent but watchful.

"Well, I daresay you will be quite famous then, as well—eloping with the gentleman that forgot to remove the thorns from his roses."

Lady Lucinda giggled. "Oh, that was quite brave of him! I fell in love instantly when I saw him standing before me all bloody and bruised, yet not letting that get him down."

Belle clamped her gaping mouth shut. It was a wonder Lord Beaverstoke survived at all, she mused with a touch of sarcasm. Brave indeed.

"I say, why are *you* in Gretna Green? Are you eloping, as well?"

For the first time, Lord Beaverstoke looked truly intrigued by the

conversation.

"I—well, no," Belle murmured, pulling back the curtain somewhat to see if Simon had discovered her missing yet. "I find myself in a bit of a spot and would consider it a personal favor if you'd escort me home. That is if you aren't planning on crossing the seas in celebration of your nuptials."

"Of course we will take you home! But are you hiding from someone, Lady Belle?" The ever-curious Lady Lucinda asked. Her eyes caught something beyond Belle, through the parted curtain. "Well, I never! Is that the Earl of Westfield?"

Both Lady Lucinda and Lord Beaverstoke were looking out the window now in curiosity.

Drat.

Belle sank lower, hoping their curiosity would end soon and not draw Simon's attention. She should have insisted that they take her home the moment she entered the coach.

Curiosity got the better of her and she peeked up just in time to see Simon pause at finding their carriage empty. He stood unmoving for a moment before he sent a murderous glance to where the driver should have been perched. Of course, Belle had been the one to insist that their driver take the opportunity to relieve himself and grab refreshments. And even though Belle could not quite see his eyes she sensed his fury. And fear.

She had not even considered that he might imagine something truly dangerous had happened to her, rather than assuming she ran from him.

Guilt stabbed at her.

Perhaps she'd made a mistake, but it was too late to back out of her decision now.

Then Lady Lucinda lifted her hand and waved at a now very panic-stricken Simon. Belle nearly punched the woman.

Simon glanced their way and Belle plastered herself against the seat, out of his line of sight.

"Stop waving at him!" Belle hissed.

Lucinda frowned at her. "Why ever? Oh..." Her mouth formed a round "O" as realization dawned. "You are eloping with Westfield!"

Belle was just about to bolt out from the other side of the coach when the door swung open, revealing an anxious Simon. His relief upon discovering her was quickly shadowed by his anger, but he kept his voice charming when he said, "There you are, my dear. I see you've made new friends."

Belle's eyes narrowed on his easy smile. He knew very well she'd tried to escape her fate and failed.

His hand reached into the carriage and he held it palm up and out

to her, expecting her to take it. She shot him a glare before finally placing her hand in his.

Without so much as a farewell, Belle climbed out from the coach. Simon never let go of her hand, walking her back to their own carriage.

“We need to talk.”

Oh, *now* he wanted to talk when before had refused to listen to reason. She turned toward him, hands on hips, just outside their carriage.

“There is nothing to talk about. You are forcing me to marry against my will. Not only do I find it barbaric, but I will also never forgive you for it.”

“Damnation, would it be so bad to be married to me?” he snapped and Belle felt the familiar ache in her heart flicker to life.

She looked up from the ground and wished she hadn’t.

Misery stared back at her.

How was she to explain to him in a mere moment what had taken her four years to accept?

“You do not understand.”

“Enlighten me.”

Belle considered him. He deserved the truth. But to crack open her deepest, darkest pit of misery and regret, one she’d fought hard to close, was difficult. It highlighted both her greatest mistake and greatest flaw. But, if it served to finally wipe the hurt from his eyes, she’d do it.

Her hands instinctively moved to rest over her wound, his eyes following the motion.

“When...when I nearly died, I cannot recall how I dragged myself from the docks or how my brother found me. I only remember waking up on a ship in unbearable pain, crying as someone tended to my wound.”

His eyes softened and she turned away, staring at the inn’s sign above the establishment. He said nothing, giving her space to speak.

“To this day I don’t know why I was the one Edgar singled out. But the next time I woke, I was in my bed, recovering from my wound.”

She turned to look at him then, her eyes bright with tears. “The doctor said I would live, but that I would never bear any children. I can never give any man an heir, a tragedy I accepted a long time ago, but one that you must now understand. Do you see now why I cannot marry you?”

“I’m so sorry, Belle. No woman should ever have to endure what was done to you.” He took a single step closer to her, bringing her into his arms. “But I do not care that you cannot bear me a child. I love you.”

Belle stilled.

Surely he could not mean...

She shook her head. "Simon—"

"Is that your only reservation?"

"—you say that now, but you are an *earl*. I cannot sire you an heir."

"I. Don't. Care."

"You will," Belle pressed. "Perhaps not now, but one day you will come to discover the cost of your sacrifice and you will resent me for it."

"I could never resent you. I *love* you. Do you know what that means? *Unconditionally*. I've fallen madly in love with you. I'm starved for you, I cannot breathe without you."

Belle took a step back, breaking the contact between them, shaking her head in denial.

Love—the reason that crushed all reasons.

It could not be as simple as that, could it?

"Do you love me, Belle? Or do you just love those damn lemon cakes of yours?" The last was growled on a sour note, causing hysterical laughter to erupt from her.

They stared at each other in silence, Belle contemplative as Simon watched her with weariness. Nothing remained but the truth. She'd come this far, hadn't she?

"I do love you, more than I love those damn lemon cakes."

"Thank God!" Simon replied, his voice hoarse with emotion as he hauled her into his embrace and pulled her tightly against him. "Say it again."

"I love you."

"Again."

Belle shook her head in exasperation. "But Simon—"

He silenced her with a soft kiss, sensing her inner turmoil. "I don't care about any of that, sweet."

She felt the tears falling down her cheeks, then. Simply overwhelmed.

"Hell," Simon continued, "We've kidnapped members of the ton, surely we can disappear for a few months to steal a baby."

Belle laughed, wiping at her tears. "Steal a baby?"

"Or adopt, whichever you prefer."

Hope blossomed in her heart. "But it must be a boy, heir and all that," she teased back.

His hand came to rest on her cheeks, his green eyes bright with love, "So you will marry me, Belle? Without me having to chain you to my side?"

Belle nodded, not certain she could say the word "yes" without bawling all over him. "You are hopeless, do you know that?"

“Only when it comes to you, my love. Usually, I’m just boorish.”

Belle choked back a laugh. “So you finally admit you are a bore. It’s about time.”

They stood there grinning at one another when someone started to clap, a slow rhythmic sound.

“How very charming.”

The voice dripped with sarcasm, chilling Belle to the bone.

They whirled in unison.

A few feet away stood their worst nightmare, and he had a pistol leveled at Belle’s heart.

“I’m afraid I am going to have to cut this little elopement short.”

Simon stepped in front of Belle, shielding her. “Over my dead body.”

“Gladly.”

Belle pushed past Simon, fear gripping her heart. “No! Wait! Do you want to cause a spectacle?”

De Roux paused, then gave a single nod. He motioned with his gun to their carriage. “Get in. Both of you.”

Simon’s strong arm circled her waist and Belle leaned into him, her face pale. How had they forgotten about the danger? Entering the carriage, they were followed by the despicable excuse for a human being, who smiled with cruel joy as he sank down across from them.

Belle regarded him warily, aware of Simon’s stiff form beside her. The gun was still leveled at her heart.

“We can discuss this like men with honor,” Simon said, rather snappily.

De Roux tilted his head to the side. “Honor. Such a hair-splitting little word. Do I possess any honor? It is your hope, I presume, that I do. Yet, you’ve seen the pain I inflict firsthand and still you appeal to something that clearly does not exist.”

“So you are without honor, then?” Simon asked.

Belle heard the disgust in his voice.

De Roux shrugged. “There is honor in truth, I suppose, and you have seen mine.”

“Your truth is death,” Belle snapped.

“Yes,” he growled. “A truth you’ve managed to outrun up until this moment, but no matter, now I shall be the one to do the talking, though it will be over both your dead corpses.”

“What did I ever do to you?” Belle whispered, rather snippily.

There was a slight shifting of the carriage as the driver climbed on his perch. A muffled “Ready milord, milady?” could be heard.

De Roux lifted a hand to rap on the roof of the carriage.

Belle inhaled a breath to scream, but Simon gripped her hand and squeezed *hard*.

Oh right, there was a pistol pointing at her heart.

Fine, then.

She shot De Roux a look just as the carriage started forward, causing her to rock her back on the seat. "All I did was take back what you stole."

De Roux's laugh was a harsh cackle. "With your little act, you branded me a traitor to my country, princess," he spat at her.

"How is that even possible? I was nothing but a foolish girl you fooled. And quite effectively, too," Belle muttered bitterly.

"All my contacts knew of your pedigree—"

Pedigree?

"—and they all knew I was successful in obtaining the information. So when I arrived without it, suspicion arose. They believed I took a liking to you. Then, someone clever enough to recognize the sensitivity surrounding my empty-handed return, whispered accusations, rumors into the right ears."

"I still do not understand why that would matter?"

"Your family has been embroiled in service to your crown for centuries," De Roux growled.

Belle's face slackened in shock at that. *But that would mean father had been a spy, as well.* "I know nothing of this."

"I don't believe you. It was you!" he roared. "Who else could it have been? I've run through every possible option, it could only have been you."

"You believe I was the one that started the rumors? But that's ridiculous! How could I accuse you of anything if I didn't know anything?"

"You knew to steal my parchment!"

"I was suspicious that night. And my suspicions proved correct. But I had no idea *why*. I suspected you were not who you claimed to be, but I had no proof. Not till your accent slipped."

Simon gripped her hand in warning, but she ignored it. This man actually believed her to be a spy. How absolutely absurd. His vendetta, however, made much more sense in light of this recent knowledge.

"I am not a spy."

He waved her declaration aside. "You are a clever little liar, but I've figured you and your brothers out."

Quinn and Bradford.

Her heart sank.

"My brothers have nothing to do with this."

Simon gripped her arm tightly, warning her to keep her mouth shut.

De Roux truly wasn't in his right mind. Any doubt she may have harbored that he acted out of some misplaced sense of revenge over

her betrayal vanished. He did not want revenge because she'd stolen his papers. He wanted revenge because he thought she outwitted him at his own game.

"Oh, you would prefer I believe that, wouldn't you, Lady Belle? Not to worry, they are next on my list."

Not if I wrap my fingers around your neck first.

"But first, I will have the pleasure of killing you and your lover while *you* know that your brothers are next. How does that feel?"

Simon squeezed her hand yet again. She spared him a glance and nearly gasped. He was beyond tense. Whether it was in anger or fear, she couldn't say, but he looked simply murderous. His other hand was fisted at his side and his jaw was clenched so hard that veins popped out of his neck. His shoulders were bunched in suppressed fury and his eyes were narrowed to slits. To put it plainly, he looked like a barely-restrained bear, ready to attack. But with the pistol aimed at her heart, he would not take the chance.

Belle's worried gaze returned to De Roux.

Hell's bells.

They needed a miracle.

Chapter 23

That miracle came in a very unlikely form.

Simon's grip on her hand was starting to hurt; the tension in the carriage was unbearable and the cruel edge to their captor's smile wasn't aiding her rising panic. Belle did not know how long they'd manage to go on like this. She refused, however, to die at the hands of this man.

It could be possible to jump him, but with Simon's tight grip on her hand, she imagined he'd yank her back at even the slightest movement. He held onto her almost as if he expected her to act rashly. This, of course, did nothing to stop her from plotting an escape anyway.

Then, to their surprise, the carriage suddenly came to an abrupt halt. Had it not been for De Roux's snarl of "What the devil!" Belle would have believed this to be their end.

De Roux rapped on the roof. When nothing happened, he shot them a glare, menace in his eyes. "No matter, this will have to do." He swung open the door and stood to exit the carriage, his pistol never wavering from Belle. "Get out, slowly. And do not motion danger to the driver or I'll shoot him dead," he hissed.

Belle swallowed down her terror. She'd be damned if she cowered in fear. If Death came knocking at her door, he'd be met with bravery and foolish behavior. Yes, there would certainly be some of that. But something unexpected happened then, something so unforeseen that Belle would look back on it in marvel for years.

Belle had started to rise, half crouched to exit the carriage when Lord Beaverstoke suddenly appeared behind her stinky-breathed terrorizer. Before the surprise could even register on her face, the funny-looking lord wacked De Roux over the head with a piece of

wood.

As De Roux crumbled to the ground, blood dripping from the side of his head, his pistol went off. Belle and Simon both glanced up at the gaping hole in the carriage roof before settling their shocked eyes back on the collapsed figure.

With a flash of movement Lady Lucinda appeared in the fray, snatching the weapon from De Roux's clutches and pointing it, unwavering, at his head.

"Lady Belle! Lord Westfield! Are you both all right?" The lady's voice penetrated their shocked daze.

Belle shivered when Simon's unsteady hands tightly gripped her waist. "Belle, are you hurt? Tell me you're not hurt."

Belle plopped down on his knee and took his face in her hands, murmuring, "I am unhurt, truly."

His shoulders dropped with relief. "It's over then."

Belle nodded, glancing at Lord Beaverstoke. He stood over the body of the man who'd tormented Belle for so long, his glasses askew on his nose and a satisfied smile coating his face.

She shook her head in disbelief. However unlikely, Lord Beaverstoke and Lady Lucinda had saved the day. It seemed rather impossible for it to be over so quickly without a fight, without begging or without any climax really—yet, here they stood, free and unharmed.

Belle glanced at up Simon, noting he also gazed in incredulous fascination at the couple who'd saved them.

"Thank you," Simon murmured. "Your bravery saved our lives."

Lady Lucinda beamed. "We could not sit by and do nothing—especially after we saw you being held at gunpoint. So we decided it was our duty to rescue you."

"How on earth did you manage it?" Belle asked, relieved yet still a bit dubious.

Lady Lucinda glanced lovingly at her heroic lord. "Well, we rode out on our horses to gain some ground on you, then we stopped the carriage by flashing notes at the driver—he had no idea what was going on, mind you! Seems when he was inside the Inn, a gentleman, or rather this *person*," she shook the gun at De Roux's prone form, "had explained that you two were ready to continue northward and he simply did so when he returned and heard your signal for departure." Lady Lucinda turned towards their driver. "Isn't that right, sir?"

The driver nodded at Lady Lucinda before sheepishly turning towards Belle and Simon. "My apologies milord, milady. I 'ad no idea bout the bad business."

"Oh, that's all right," Belle responded, for none of it was the poor man's fault, after all.

“So!” Lady Lucinda exclaimed, garnering their attention once again, “In any case, when the carriage stopped, we rescued you! A grand plan, was it not?” Lucinda cried with excitement, waving her arms around with a flourish.

“Careful dear,” Lord Beaverstoke admonished, taking the pistol from her with gentle hands.

“Oh! Right!”

Belle managed a small smile for their rescuers. “Thank you, Lady Lucinda, and you, Lord Beaverstoke. I will forever be in your debt.”

“Oh, no need to thank us, it was quite fun! More fun than I would have thought for an elopement.”

Lord Beaverstoke gave a single nod.

“So, what ever are we going to do with him?” Lady Lucinda asked, waving a hand the weasel on the ground.

“Tie him up and hand him over to the authorities?” Lord Beaverstoke suggested.

Simon shook his head, his arms tightening around Belle. “We cannot take the chance that he might escape.”

Belle stared at De Roux. He had nearly succeeded in killing her three times, not including this attempt. She should have enlisted Lord Beaverstoke’s aid from the start, she mused.

“Please tell me we are not traveling with him back to London?” The thought left a bitter taste in her mouth.

She did not wish to be near the man. He could be dragged there, tied to the end of a rope attached to a moving carriage for all she cared.

Simon’s face skewed up in disgust. “No, sweet, we will leave him here for your...” he cleared his throat, “the others to find. They are not even an hour behind us if my estimations are correct.”

Belle raised her brows at how Simon knew that fact, though she trusted the information. She was surprised at how close he had been cutting his kidnapping of her, though—Bradford would be *furious*—but nodded, pleased with the idea that they could leave De Roux here for her brothers to handle. Anything was better than journeying with the man who had caused her countless of pain.

Lord Beaverstoke glanced around. “I suppose we can tie him to a tree just off the path and gag him.”

“But what if he gets away?”

“Trust me, Lady Lucinda,” Simon murmured, the edge of his voice laced with menace. “He will not get away. I will make sure of it... assuming I can find some rope.”

“Got some rope ’ere, milord,” the carriage-driver supplied.

“Hold for a moment,” Belle murmured as she hopped from the carriage and crossed the distance over to the unconscious Frenchman.

She stared down at his still form, narrowed her eyes and kicked him hard in the side. “May you rot in hell, Edgar De Roux.”

Simon came up beside her, resting his hand on the small of her back. “It’s over. He’ll never harm you again.”

She nodded, unable to form a reply. Now that he lay on the ground helpless, she felt nothing but pity for him—pity he did not even deserve. It occurred to her that now that he was finally taken care of, her brothers would return home.

Happiness sprouted up inside of her, like a little seed that had been long dormant.

Simon, Lord Beaverstoke and the driver all set to work trussing up De Roux like a Christmas chicken and securing him to the tree. She and Lady Lucinda watched in relative silence—relative, as there was only so much quiet the bubbly Lady Lucinda could tolerate. Rope wound around the French spy from the neck to the ankles and a gag was secured around his mouth. Then Simon punched him in the jaw a few extra times for good measure.

He made his way over to her.

“So,” Simon murmured in her ear, his warm breath caressing her skin. “What happens now?”

Belle tilted her head to reward him with a small smile. His hair was disheveled and the worry she’d come to expect in those beautiful eyes was replaced by serenity. He stood calmly before her. Gone was the man who had shadowed her every step out of concern. In his place, a man patiently awaited her judgment—his fate—with nothing but love in his gaze. He was leaving the decision up to her.

Belle envisioned her life with him, which wasn’t hard since she’d done it countless of times in the past, but this time instead of envisioning the resentment and hatred that may grow at her inability to bearing him an heir, she envisioned more love and happiness growing with each passing moment.

Her smile widened. “I do not know, I suppose it’s past time to return home and welcome my brothers back.”

His face fell. Shoulders drooped.

A slow, teasing chuckled escaped her and she winked at him.

With a growl, he snatched her by the waist and pulled her tightly against his chest. “It’s considered rude to tease your future husband.”

“What? Aren’t we going to have an unbearably long engagement first? How utterly disappointing, I rather enjoy the sound of calling you, my fiancé.”

He groaned. “An hour, that is all you get.” Then his eyes turned pleading. “Please do not make me wait. I don’t think I can survive it.”

“My brothers will come back now that the despicable creature is taken care of. And I have missed them so.”

Belle could tell Simon was about to retort with some snappy comment when Lady Lucinda interrupted, "If I can make a suggestion?" They both turned their heads to look at her. "Lord Westfield can always take up residence with you instead of the other way around. That is what Lord Beaverstoke will be doing because he has eight sisters! And there is just so much room at..."

Belle frowned at Lady Lucinda, already muting the lady's incessant babbling in her mind. What an odd creature. Yet, not a terrible plan. Though she could tell Simon thought differently.

"They are more than welcome to come live with us," he muttered, quickly adding, "for a few weeks."

Belle leaned back to gaze into his determined eyes. "I've missed my brothers and they'll want to spend time with me, too, Simon."

"Then your brothers can visit, sweet, but I'm not taking up residence with them." He shuddered at the thought. "Why are we even discussing this?"

"Because you know how much I enjoy stirring up trouble—and my brothers are even worse."

He snorted and then murmured in a low voice so that only she can hear, "They cannot be that spectacular. Why Lord Beaverstoke succeeded in minutes where they failed for years. I will take my chances."

"You are incorrigible. You kidnapped me without their knowledge! They are chasing us even now. They will not like it."

"If I asked their permission, then it wouldn't have been a kidnapping, now would it?"

She burst into laughter at that. "Who knew you were so fond of trouble, Simon Tremaine?" Belle threw herself into his arms. "But I like trouble. So marry me and be done with it."

A low growl of approval rumbled in his chest and he lowered his head—

"Oh, I know!" Lady Lucinda chirped just as Simon was about to touch his lips to Belle's. "We can have a double wedding!"

Their heads whipped around in something akin to horror, but they managed to quickly mask their expressions.

A double wedding?

With Lady Lucinda and Lord Beaverstoke?

Oh dear.

"That is a splendid idea, my dear. We've caught a villain together, so it is only natural that we get married together."

This was by far the strangest couple Belle had ever encountered.

"Yes, it is a grand plan, is it not?" Lady Lucinda replied.

What could she possibly say?

Belle glanced helplessly at Simon, who appeared more amused than

averse. He caught her gaze and lowered his mouth to her ear. "They did save our lives," he whispered.

Belle sighed in resignation before a thought caused her to smile. She lived rather a rather unconventional life, why should her nuptials be any different?

Victory: an act of defeating an enemy in battle. Usually, followed by a celebration of sorts. And, in Belle's case, what better way was there to celebrate their triumph than vowing to love one another till death do them part?

So, one minute on the hour after their miraculous win, Simon and Belle were married alongside Lord Beaverstoke and Lady Lucinda. A peculiar wedding with a peculiar couple in celebration of an even more peculiar end.

Belle stood with Simon pressed up against her side, their hands clasped together, grinning at each other, Lady Lucinda's giggles of excitement something of a distant sound.

What Belle had seen of the couple's vows had been earnest and passionate. They completely ignored the blacksmith's attempts to hurry things along. Their love was bright, certainly, but still failed to match what Belle felt at that moment for the man gazing down at her.

When their turn came, Belle had floated on a cloud of bliss, the blacksmith's words soundless in the wake Simon's eyes, so filled with awe. There was a slightly mischievous tilt to his already-grinning lips that fascinated her and it was only by the sudden expectation in his gaze that she knew it was her turn to say "I do."

The vow left her lips in a rather breathless whisper.

Then the blacksmith exclaimed in a boisterous voice: "What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder!"

But Simon was already kissing her, his tongue impatient to invade the silken softness of her mouth.

Belle's eyes stung with tears and Simon, who must have felt the trickle on his upper lip, moved his mouth to hover slightly over her ear, "No regrets?"

She sniffed. "Absolutely not."

The smile he gave her sent butterflies aflutter in her mid-region. Magic lived in the love that bound them together.

Forever.

She hoped.

No, she *believed*.

"And no more secrets, agreed?" he murmured, wiping away one of her tears with his thumb.

Her head bobbed once in a single nod.

One could argue that a countless amount of their misery might have

been spared if they'd only been truthful with one another—if *she* had only been truthful. But Belle wasn't about to dwell on the past.

"Good." Simon kissed her again then. It was not a gentle peck on the lips or the sweet, tender kiss he'd just given her to seal their vows, no, this was a passionate, both-knees-wobbling, overwhelming-her-senses kind of kiss. She leaned into him in response, pressing up against his hard frame, entirely uncaring of their audience.

When Lady Lucinda began to titter behind her hand, Simon broke the connection with a happy, slightly exasperated sigh and Belle recalled an important secret that she had yet to share.

"Oh, I do have one more secret."

Thick blond brows lifted in interest. "Oh? Will I feel compelled to maim someone after you reveal it?"

"No, nothing quite as exciting as that," she chuckled, lifting up onto her toes to whisper the words in his ear, "I am Madam De La Frey."

Simon's mouth dropped open at her admission, his eyes round in shock. "You are *what*?"

She grinned up at him. "You married an infamous woman, love."

Then Belle laughed.

For indeed, he had.

Thanks for reading!

I hope you enjoyed *A Gentleman's Guide to Catch a Lady*! Would you please take the time to leave a review on Amazon?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tanya Wilde developed a passion for reading when she had nothing better to do than lurk in the library during her lunch breaks. Her love affair with pen and paper followed soon after she had devoured all of the library's historical romance books!

When she's not meddling in the lives of her characters or drinking copious amounts of coffee, she's off on adventures with her partner in crime.

Wilde lives in a town at the foot of the Outeniqua Mountains, South Africa.

An Ear's Guide to Catch a Lady

Excerpt

amzn.to/1Q3Vtn5

Chapter 1

Pain. There was so much pain and wretchedness it made it impossible to summon even one coherent thought. Torturous. Lifting one heavy lid Evelyn shut it instantly as more blinding pain pierced her skull. Damn wretched head. That much could at least be determined. A soft groan escaped her lips. She remembered nothing except a vague recollection of consuming a rather large amount of... something. Wine perhaps?

A vile taste coated her mouth and her stomach roiled in protest. She wanted nothing more than to be swept into the sweet allure of darkness, but the continued throb prevented sleep from claiming her. It left her no choice but to be brave. One eye popped open, then another. Gah! She squinted as light invaded her vision. After what felt like hours of torment, the blur of brightness disappeared and Evelyn found herself staring at the unfamiliar face of a male. The breath stilled in her lungs. Her eyes widened. The world stopped.

It had to be a dream. Yes, she was still caught in a marvelous stupor. It was the only acceptable reason. Perhaps she should first assure herself that he was a figment of her imagination before she gave into hysterics.

With a feather-light touch, she brushed her index finger against his nose. Flesh met her fingertip. Her hand snatched back as she let out a tiny screech.

Oh, stars! He was as real as her ruination. Her eyes clamped shut and she forced the wave of panic down that threatened to consume her. *No! No! No!* All the hours spent pouring over maps, carefully selecting every country, every city she wanted to explore in her quest to become a world renowned traveler evaporated in the sleeping face

of this stranger.

With a sudden movement his leg brushed up against hers and she scrambled out from under the covers, nearly toppling over when her foot got caught in the sheets. In a daze, she glanced down at her attire, which comprised only of her chemise. She cringed. It barely covered her legs.

A loud snore drew her gaze back to the stranger. Goodness! She took a moment to inspect his face. No recognition lit in her, yet somehow he seemed familiar. A glance around the room revealed two empty wine bottles, along with her scattered items on the floor. By some small miracle, whatever had transpired hadn't been in her room.

That might be the only thing that had gone right since Evelyn's ill-fated journey began two days ago. First, her maid unexpectedly fell ill and had to remain with her family, leaving her unchaperoned. Then the carriage had broken down in the rain.

Henry. Hope bloomed as she remembered her footman. He would have sent for the repairs of the carriage. Flee. That was her single course of action. Later she would try to piece together her memories but first, she must put as much distance as possible between her and this man.

She jumped as he stirred and gave another loud snore, terrified that he would wake up before she left. She snatched up his shirt, having spotted no sign of her dress. It gave her the impression of a large man, much larger than he appeared to be.

With a cautious step forward, she moved toward the bed and inspected the sheets. It didn't appear to be all that rumpled. Her eyes took in every small detail. She released a shaky breath. He had an impressively strong face, which looked almost innocent while he slept. Even his snoring didn't subtract from his handsomeness. Black hair fell over thick brows and Evelyn had to tamp down the urge to run her fingers through them. She almost regretted that she did not remember the color of his eyes, but if she had to guess, she'd say blue.

His face committed to her memory, she turned and edged toward the door. There was a moment of brief anticipation when she heard him stir again.

Please don't wake up. Please don't wake up.

She crossed her fingers as she peeked over her shoulder, her mouth agape at the sight that greeted her. His face and body had turned away from her so she had a full view of his back and thighs. The covers must have slipped when he'd turned, she mused in wonder. Her mouth went dry as her eyes roamed the length of his magnificent body.

His back was broad and muscular. The word powerful came to mind as her gaze ventured even lower. In fact, nothing about him looked

innocent anymore. His thighs were big and strong and... So... So... Hairy?

Evelyn scowled as she inspected his hairy thighs. Was it common for a man to be that hairy? Another loud snore jerked her from her inspection and she marveled at how she'd slept an entire night without being disturbed. It was the first time she had ever heard a man snore and it was rather hypnotic, a low rumbling noise she could grow used to.

Drat! If she had to be ruined, her mind might at least have given her the courtesy of remembering the experience.

Lady Josephine and Lady Belle, her dearest friends, were always prompting her to be more adventurous. How ironic, that when she finally found an adventure, it ruined her and she did not remember any of it.

If she left now there might not even be a scandal. Not that it mattered. She had no intention of ever taking a husband. And she would never see this gentleman again.

A crack of light drew her attention to the window. Dawn would be upon them soon. There would still be plenty of time to leave the Inn undetected if she left now. She stole one last glance at the handsome stranger, opened the door and slipped out.

Moments later Evelyn was pacing up and down the Inn's muddy stables lecturing the stable doors for not knowing her footman's location. In all likelihood, he was off arranging for the repairs of the carriage, but not even that knowledge quelled her frustration. He might just as well be snoring the dawn away. She cursed her lack of attention. Where were her horses? Was there another stable perhaps? It was only a matter of time before someone found her lurking about. Country folk was notoriously early risers. If she had any common sense she would go back to her room and hide until her footman sent for her. It would seem, however, that her common sense had evaporated at the sight of a naked man.

Her fingers pinched the bridge of her nose as the ache in her head that had all but disappeared returned with force. She needed to avoid running into the stranger at all cost, but it would be impossible without her carriage. A horrific thought occurred to her. What if the stranger remembered her? What if she had given him her name?

Good morning Mr. Stranger. Might you recall me from last night? I was the strumpet in your bed, but I have no memory of our night together.

How awkward it would be to run into him again. She did not trust that she could manage a confrontation without taking to the hills.

A sudden shiver raced down her legs as cold stabbed at her feet. Her slippers weren't made for wet weather. She sighed in misery, shooting

them a disgusted glare. It was then she noticed a note sticking out of a pocket of the stranger's shirt.

Without thought, she snatched the damp note between her fingers and unfolded it. Much of the words were blotched, making it difficult to read. It still might supply a clue to the stranger's identity. Lifting the note up to her face, Evelyn studied each word with great care.

"The Black Night Inn," she read in a soft whisper. It was the name of the Inn they were lodging at.

Her fingers ran over a name she could not identify. They stopped, however, at the words that followed. *Slaughter*. Some blotched words. *Means possible*. More blotched words. *Execute*. More blotched words.

Slaughter whom? Confusion lit her brow. Again she studied the cryptic words but the rain had almost destroyed the entire content of the note. She had an odd sensation of falling as her eyes lifted in horror. Was the stranger here to slaughter some poor soul?

Don't be ridiculous, she chided herself, remembering his innocent face as he lay in a peaceful slumber.

She could not fathom that her inebriated state would have afforded such a lapse in judgment on her part. The words of the note, however, were unmistakable.

Her heart drummed against her chest. Then the realization hit her. She had possession of the note, a fact he would soon become aware of once he opened his blue-green-brown eyes. No blue, they would most certainly be blue. Gah! Her hapless adventure that boasted a fatal lapse of memory had just turned into a nightmare. And she was thinking about his eyes! Her teeth captured her lower lip. Oh, she had truly done it now.

Oh, Henry. She would have to leave him behind. No need for him to get hacked into pieces as well.

Her mind raced as she studied her surroundings and considered a plan of escape. Leaving on foot would not be wise. She would never outrun the stranger if he gave chase. But then she had no carriage, no means to hire a coach. No, what she needed was a horse, and since she didn't have one, she would have to steal one.

No, she corrected, borrow one, believing she needed to draw the line somewhere. Her hands settled on her hips as she considered how to proceed. How to go about borrowing a horse?

No answer came.

Drat, who was she fooling? She was becoming a thief. A dreadful one at that.

All those years of learning Latin and French, how to paint and play the piano, one would have thought they would teach young ladies the basic skills for survival. But no, they were delicate petals that should be protected at all times.

She snorted. It wasn't as though she had been schooled for thievery, but damnation, she hadn't been schooled for this sort of circumstance either. With a tiny shake of her head, she made her way toward the back doors of the stable. The only sounds to be heard were the soft padding of her feet.

There might be a coach waiting to be *borrowed*, she mused hopefully, pausing upon reaching the doors. One swift glance confirmed she wasn't alone.

A few feet away stood a giant black horse. It was hard to miss, given its size. At least she thought it was a horse. It looked more like a demon from hell.

"Well I never," Evelyn muttered under her breath, inspecting the empty courtyard. No groom appeared to be in sight. How odd. Who would leave such a creature unattended? Had she been wrong about her luck? No, luck would have been a pony, not the monster standing a few feet away. If the horse was any indication of his owner, she would be better off not borrowing it.

Your life is at stake, this is not the time to develop scruples, her inner voice chastised. She had stolen a villain's shirt which carried a rather damning note. Why stop at a monstrous-looking horse?

Filled with uneasiness she approached the beast and soothed her thoughts with images of her brother, Simon, and her friends. They would be devastated if anything were to happen to her.

The elusive groom had yet to make an appearance and Evelyn took that as a sign of luck. Her eyes watchful she moved closer still. The beast did not look all that approachable and worse, it was much larger than it appeared from a distance.

But what did she know about horses? Except that, one could ride them. She should have taken more interest in being taught to ride. Perhaps then she would not be hesitating now.

"This is a terrible plan." Her words of dismay echoed through the courtyard.

The horse watched her with big black eyes as she reached its side. She chuckled as it snorted against her face, smelling her hair.

"That's not straw you big silly beast," she murmured and reached out to gently run her hand over its thick neck. This was good, she thought on a nod.

With slow, cautious movements Evelyn took hold of the reins and put her foot in the stirrup when the sight of her bare leg reminded her of her state of undress. She was a *lady*. Now look at her. She was scandalous!

A hint of a smile touched her lips.

If anyone saw her now, she would be ruined. She ought not to have this feeling of brilliance in the midst of terrifying danger, but she

attributed her feelings toward the sense of adventure she was experiencing. Her plan, however, was quite simple. Get to Bath and then decide what to do, all the while hoping no one would recognize her.

She shot up a quick prayer as she hoisted herself onto the black demon. Once settled on top she took stock of her surroundings. When there was still no sign of the groom Evelyn let out a breath of relief. That was until she noticed how much of her naked legs were visible.

“Outrageous!” she muttered but forgot about her nakedness when she saw how high above the ground she sat. She whispered another quick prayer to the heavens and nudged the beast like she’d seen her brother do countless times. The beast did not move. It seemed to snort at her attempt. To Evelyn’s ears, it sounded much more like a smirk. Ghastly animal. She nudged it again, harder this time. It just snorted louder.

“Dratted beast,” she muttered glaring at the back of its head.

What did her brother do when he urged Apollo to go faster? Evelyn nudged harder still, but the horse stood there with no intention of moving. Then, just when Evelyn would have given up hope, two little rats scurried out of the stables in their direction, causing the horse to panic. A blood-curdling scream ripped from her throat as the horse reared.

Evelyn’s heart lurched in her chest, but then instinct took over and she wrapped her arms around the thick neck of the horse, holding on for dear life. She felt the legs of the beast hit the ground and without even the slightest hesitation it started forward, racing out of the courtyard, away from the Inn and—mercifully—away from the dangerous man.

Matthew Langdon, the sixth Earl of Grey was woken by a sharp noise that pierced his skull, stabbing at the throbbing ache in his head. He groaned in misery.

What in the blazes? His eyes shot open and then to the empty space beside him as he recalled his beautiful, albeit foxed guest.

Evelyn.

His lips twitched as he recalled the fascinating creature whose dress hugged her curves almost too tightly, seductively. She’d stumbled into his room with a bottle in each hand, and when she lost her balance she’d laughed at her own clumsiness. He’d been about to make his presence known when she’d spotted him and hiccupped. “You sir—*hic*—are in the—*hic*—wrong room.”

He chuckled at the memory as he stretched languidly across the bed. She’d been the most adorable foxed woman to ever accidentally stumble into his room. The only one as it happens.

Her beautiful heart-shaped face held the most tempting full lips. They begged to be kissed. Thin brows defined the shape of her eyes. And what eyes! They were a haunting shade of violet-blue with lashes so long her eyes took on a dreamy appearance. Her hair had fallen from their pins and appeared brown until she stepped into the candlelight and hues of red highlighted the freckles on her nose.

Mine.

The ferocity of that one word robbed him of his breath. It punched him in the gut and tempted him to go where he vowed never to go again. Then his mind filled with her laughter and he remembered the sound to be mesmerizing. When she'd spoken his fate had been sealed.

She had believed him to be the devil and like an idiot all he had done was stare at her face. To his utter surprise, she'd then stumbled further into his room and closed the door with a resounding kick, offering him one of her bottles. He had taken it without a word, not certain what else to do, and still in a state of wonder. Then she'd numbed him with a smile so radiant any intelligible speech disappeared from his brain. She was the most exquisite creature in existence. If he were any kind of gentleman he would have directed her back to her room. He wasn't a gentleman.

It shouldn't have come as a surprise that she believed him to be a dream. If one took into consideration the amount of wine she'd consumed it was quite possible. After all, the bottles she clutched in each hand had been empty. Throughout the entire exchange, which consisted of hiccups and gaping, she'd never once perceived him to be a man but continued to believe him a dream. A fact finally confirmed when she simply undressed and climbed into his bed. Her name had been the last whisper on her lips.

Again if he'd been any kind of gentleman he would have left, instead, he'd settled in beside her. An unusual act. He only spent the night in a woman's bed to bed her. He left after that, having no need for what came afterward. He preferred it that way. Until the mysterious Evelyn.

He hadn't even considered what might happen when she woke up to find him very much flesh and bone. He'd just wanted to be there when she did. She'd touched a chord deep inside his soul. How long since something had stirred within him, anything in the company of a woman? Six years if he recalled correctly. Perhaps it was her innocence that called to him, or perhaps because she had seen him as a dream, he can now pretend she had been one as well.

He let his hand run over the empty space and longed for her presence. No one had ever looked at him and seen a dream. His mouth twitched when he recalled that she snored ever so lightly, a soft sound that signaled a deep, peaceful slumber. His smile, however, faltered

when a slither of unease settled over him.

She would not have thought him a dream when she awakened. She would have been shocked, even scared. He did not bother to look and see if her belongings were gone. They were. He pressed his palm deeper into the empty space beside him. Warmth still touched his skin. He sunk his face into her pillow and inhaled the lingering scent of her into his lungs.

Oranges.

He groaned and tossed back the sheets. She hadn't been hysterical when she left. It appeared to be significant somehow. He wanted to find her. He wanted—no—needed to learn everything about her.

Yet, something nagged at him. Evelyn somehow seemed infinitely familiar... But hers was not a face he would forget.

He hoped her journey did not take her to London—the one place he swore he would never return to. He hated the city and everything it represented. The crowds, the noise, the smell, the filth, the pettiness of the ton and the games they played.

He reached for his shirt when he noticed it was missing. Muscles rippled as he pushed away from the bed with a frown and strolled over to the chair where her gown lay rumpled on the floor. She had taken his shirt. If lions could grin he would have put them to shame. She wore his shirt. A predatory glint entered his eyes. It instantly made him hard. It was all he could do not to imagine her legs wrapped around his—

The door burst open.

If he'd been less of man he would have jumped out of his skin.

"What the hell—"

His head snapped up as Carleton, his groom, filled the doorway breathing heavily. Growling in irritation that the man had interrupted his thoughts of Evelyn, he snapped, "Don't you ever knock?"

"Yes, sir."

"So get out and knock."

Carleton didn't move, ignoring his master's command. "Sylvester has been stolen my lord," he managed to croak, still trying to find his breath.

"What are you—"

"By a woman my lord," he interrupted, uncaring of his master's wrath. "Wore nothing but a shirt, saw it with me own eyes. Rode out of town like the devil himself nipped at her heels."

Matthew blinked. A half-naked woman stole his horse? He snorted. Preposterous. "There are only two people in this world who can handle Sylvester, Carleton. A woman is not one of them," he replied confidently.

"My lord—"

“It was not Sylvester that you saw.”

“She wore your shirt, my lord,” Carleton interrupted, yet again.

Matthew narrowed his eyes on his groom.

Carleton nodded in understanding.

“The blood stain on the back?” He had taken a fall the day before.

His groom nodded.

Matthew stared at Carleton in disbelief and growing horror.

“Describe her,” he whispered.

Matthew’s anger mounted with each word as he listened to Carleton’s description of Evelyn. Fury rose in the pit of his stomach with such force that his breath came out in gasps. Bloody foolish woman! Did she not realize that she could be killed? If not by his horse then by cutthroats?

Saints protect her; he would strangle her if she wasn’t dead already. He stilled. The thought of any harm befalling her left him cold. He cursed his growing fear. Later he would examine it and what it meant, for now, he needed to go after her. With his decision made, he ran from the room.

Naked.

A Lady's Guide to Kiss a Rake

Excerpt

<http://amzn.to/29gN9WV>

Prologue

“I’ve never been kissed.”

“What!” Lady Belle said, smothering a laugh of horror at Lady Josephine’s confession.

“Oh my,” said Lady Evelyn, “I can’t imagine not being kissed before.”

Jo glanced down at her pretty silk taffeta gown as a flood of despair swept over her. She was going to die a virgin.

“All I want is one kiss from a man who would make it spectacular. A kiss to rule over all kisses.”

Belle smiled, her eyes sparkling. “You mean a kiss from a rake.”

“St. Aldwyn seems to enjoy your company,” Evelyn said thoughtfully.

“St. Aldwyn enjoys taunting me,” Jo replied.

A loud bubble of laughter escaped Evelyn, drawing the attention of a group of ladies near them. “That is the most absurd thing I have ever heard!”

“Well he does, and besides, St. Aldwyn doesn’t count.”

“Oh Jo, stop being such a ninny! I wager you can seduce a kiss from any man in this crowd of gentlemen,” Belle said gleefully.

“No, I—”

“She is right,” Evelyn chimed in, “any man would be lucky to have your attention.”

“No, I—”

Belle clapped her hands together. “I have a fabulous idea! We pick a gentleman, who you then have to seduce a kiss from. Oh, don’t look at me like that. We will make it worth your while. A wager, if you will.”

“I believe I have just the right gentleman for the wager,” reported Evelyn. “My husband told me that the Earl of Craven arrived in

London today and will be in attendance tonight.”

A mischievous glint entered Belle’s eye. “He will be perfect as he is rumored to be quite handsome and wicked.”

Jo stared at them in horror. Lord Craven was a rake, and not just any rake, a notorious one at that. Whispers that one glance from him could ruin you circled his name. No way would she be able to seduce a kiss from him.

“What shall we wager?” Evelyn asked just before Belle excused herself, slipping into the crowd.

Jo wrinkled her nose. “There is nothing that can move me to accept your wager.” Movement to her right caught her attention and she groaned. “What’s *he* doing here?” He being the insufferable—delectable—Marquis of St. Aldwyn.

“I do not understand why you dislike him so,” Evelyn said, glancing his way. “He’s very entertaining.”

Jo snorted. “No, he is not.”

Evelyn laughed. “Well, he’s obscenely wealthy.”

“Yes, it is rumored to be so,” Jo said tartly, eyeing the devil in question before glancing away.

“Oh stop, what has St. Aldwyn done to deserve such scorn? Oh bother, now he’s looking at us. What might he think now?” She gave Jo a teasing nudge.

“He best look passed us if he knows what is best for him,” Jo muttered under her breath, but her gaze shifted to him again, only to note that he indeed stared their way. Her attention refocused on the crowded ballroom in search of the notorious rake, Craven. Not that she would recognize him if she saw him, she had only ever heard rumors about him, never having the unfortunate pleasure of meeting the scoundrel.

“I wonder if he has arrived yet.”

“If who has arrived yet?”

Evelyn and Jo swirled as St. Aldwyn came up from behind them. *Sneaky little rat.*

“Beatrice,” Jo answered with the first name that came to mind. “I haven’t seen her around yet.” She frowned down at Evelyn’s foot that nudged her.

“He as in *Lady* Beatrice?” St. Aldwyn asked in a mocking tone.

“Well no—” Evelyn began but was interrupted as Belle rushed toward them, bubbling in excitement.

“He is here! You should see—oh, good evening my lord. I did not see you there.” Belle’s excitement faded to a calm and collected smile.

“Apparently.”

“Well if you will excuse us?” she said as she dragged Evelyn and Jo in another direction. “Mother wishes to have a word.” The last words

were said over her shoulder, knowing very well that her mother passed away when she was but a fledgling.

“How rude you are, Belle,” Jo chastised her friend as they stopped in front of a potted plant, leaving St. Aldwyn to stare at them with narrowed eyes across the ballroom.

“Oh posh, he was never going to leave. Anyhow, Lord Craven arrived only moments ago,” she whispered in a hushed tone.

Jo swallowed her panic as she listened to her friends conspire her ruination. She couldn’t do this, she told herself. If Craven was as handsome as the man who had just materialized out of the crowd like an avenging angel, she would call for an urgent discussion with her friends. Jo gaped at the image of the man. “Goodness.”

She was aware of her friends jerking their heads toward her. Upon seeing her expression, they turned to what had discomposed her so. Jo only barely noticed their mouths drop open as well.

“Oh, my.” She heard Evelyn whisper and then Belle’s, “That’s him, that’s Lord Craven.”

The man was sin incarnate with his dark hair combed back from of his face and dressed entirely in black. She was pretty certain his eyes were black as well but it was too far away to tell. He reminded her of the angel of death.

“He is the one I’m supposed to kiss?” Jo asked stunned.

“Amazing, is he not?” Belle said with excitement.

“Impossible.”

Chapter 1

It should have been an ordinary day for Lady Josephine Tremont, but fate, it seemed, had made other arrangements. Oh, the day had begun normally enough—except for two little things: the wager Jo had somehow managed to get muddled in (that alone seemed to hang over her head like a thunderous cloud) and the fact that her friends Lady Belle and Lady Evelyn stood before her, schooling her on how to go about luring a kiss from the most notorious rake in England.

The Earl of Craven.

All in all, Jo had lacked the foresight to say no, and now she was reaping the consequences in one of the most opulent rooms in her home: the parlor. Needless to say, it seemed reasonable to believe that her friends were not only schooling her on how to entice a kiss but ultimately, how to ruin her sterling reputation. Not that her reputation could be considered sterling, she was a self-proclaimed spinster after all. In the eyes of society that placed her in the category of being crippled in some way.

The dramatic motion of Belle's arms interrupted her musings.

"First," Belle put in, "you will need to draw Craven into a web of mystery and intrigue."

"No problem."

Evelyn chortled at the sarcasm in Jo's voice.

Belle ignored them and continued, "Then you must send a smoldering stare in his direction, one that promises untold pleasure. After which, you shall ignore him for the remainder of the evening."

Jo shook her head in disbelief. "You are insane." *A smoldering stare that promises untold pleasure?* Why it must be the most ridiculous thing Jo had ever heard.

Belle continued, ignoring Jo and tucking a wayward curl behind her

ear, “Lastly, you will accept a dance from him, and while you are twirling about, your body shall make love to his to the rhythm of the music. He will never be able to resist you after that.”

Jo stared at Belle, mouth agape. “I take that back, you are not insane, you’re beyond demented. How am I to accomplish all your instructions in one evening? And make love to him with my body while we dance? How is that even possible?”

“Oh, you do not have to do all that in one evening,” Evelyn said with a crease in her brow. “It will take at least three or four evenings.”

Jo lifted an incredulous brow. “You agree with this insanity?”

Her friend choked back a laugh. “I don’t see why not. I’ve seen Belle wrap gentlemen around her finger. If there is a method that will work, it will be hers.”

Jo regarded them with a skeptical look. A few months ago, Evelyn had married the renowned recluse, the Earl of Grey, and never once had to seduce her husband. On the contrary, she had done everything in her power to resist the Earl’s relentless pursuit, but love had won out in the end. Belle, on the other hand, was as unattached and inexperienced as Jo.

Belle nodded. “Exactly—besides it’s not so hard. When you dance, the rhythm of your body should inspire the suggestions. Trust me, he will pick up on it, no matter how subtle.”

“Yes, but you do not want to come on too strong. Remember, your goal is one kiss, not to be seduced,” Evelyn commented in a thoughtful manner.

“A kiss could still ruin me.”

“Well then, you will just have to make it worth your while,” Belle murmured with a sly smile, reaching for a lemon cake.

“I’m not as fearless as you are,” Jo argued.

Two snorts were her only answer.

“Very well, I am not as fearless at flirtation. Draw him into a web of mystery and intrigue? I do not even know what that means.”

“Oh, that’s the easy part,” Belle said brightly. “Evelyn and I will whisper some intriguing tidbits in the right ears and the rest, as they say, will be history. All you need to do is work on your smolder, woven with a hint of surprise, to cast his way.”

“Woven with a hint of surprise?” Jo asked, skeptical.

Evelyn nodded. “When you draw his attention, he will recall the intriguing whispers about you. So when you note his regard, a hint of surprise should be displayed in your gaze, as though you haven’t even noticed him before that moment.”

“Then you drop your gaze to admire his well-built form, a hint of a smile playing across your features, only then do you glance away,” Belle explained.

“Uh, where does the smolder come in?” Jo asked, surprised she could even speak after hearing *that*.

“I suggest she imparts the smolder when she admires his body,” Evelyn said, excitement lighting her eyes. “Then when she locks gazes with him, there should be a hint of a smile on her lips. It will give him the impression that whatever thought had crossed her mind during her perusal was her little secret.”

“Brilliant Evelyn!” Belle said with a clap of her hands. “She can turn away without even acknowledging him, as though she had played her mind fun and now she’s moving on.”

“Mind fun?” Jo recognized the terror in her own voice.

“He will be curious enough to ask for a dance,” Evelyn agreed with a nod.

“No,” Belle said tapping her chin in thought, “he will not ask out of curiosity, I wager it will irk him to no end that she dismissed him from her mind after what he would assume to be a thorough examination of his body.”

“I do believe you are right.”

“And I believe,” Jo put in, exasperated, “you have forgotten I am still here!”

“Oh, Jo we are sorry,” Evelyn said with a shake of her head. “It’s just so exciting!”

“Yes, but am I not supposed to be the excited one?” Jo muttered under her breath, then on a louder note, “I daresay I may not be able to pull it off.”

“Oh, posh!” Belle said waving her hand in the air. “Of course you will, but you must want to pull it off, otherwise it won’t work and you will come off looking strange.”

“And we would not want that,” Jo muttered.

“Besides it’s a wager,” Evelyn reminded her. “If it was easy, it wouldn’t be this fun.”

“What of my brother? The great and powerful Marquis of Warton. He’s been hounding my every step, watching me like a hawk. He even warned me away from the Marquis of St. Aldwyn, a man I have never shown any interest in. What do you imagine he will do once he takes note of my apparent interest in Craven?”

Her brother would send her to Green Rose Cottage without listening to reason. This would be fine, except that Jo was part of a group of individuals who saved women and children that were abused by their families or spouses. She could never abandon these projects any more than she could abandon her friends.

Unfortunately, for all their planning and conspiring, things had gone terribly awry with their last project, hence the reason her brother was acting as her shadow lately. At least some good had come

from that disaster. Evelyn had realized how much she loved her now husband and even their good friend Lord Weatherly had found love with Lady Madeleine, who happened to be the subject of their project at the time. This wager had seemed just the thing to take her mind off the humdrum of monotony nipping at her heels these past weeks.

“Do not worry about your brother, he will be too preoccupied to note your flirtations,” Belle murmured, a spark entering her gaze.

Jo only lifted a brow. At least once in her life, she yearned to be kissed by a man who possessed great passion, which happened to be why she hadn’t protested much against the wager in the first place. If they had a plan to keep her brother occupied, she would not meddle.

A mock sigh heaved from her chest. “I suppose I shall have to work on my smolder then.”

Broad smiles met her statement.

“Just don’t tell your husband,” she told Evelyn. “No need to attract unwanted attention.” And by unwanted attention, she meant the Marquis of St. Aldwyn.

“Of course not!” Evelyn said offended. “I would never do that. Besides, we ladies need our secrets.”

Belle snorted. “Tell that to your husband as soon as he learns you have included yourself in Jo’s next project.”

“I will tell him.” When Belle and Jo lifted their brows she finished with a smile, “Eventually.”

“You promised Grey you would inform him of any projects you wish to be included in,” Jo pointed out even though she had no intention of involving her friend in the next project. Not that she wished to exclude Evelyn, but her husband could be an overprotective beast.

“*Dangerous* projects, and since it won’t be dangerous, I do not see the need to inform him of anything.”

“There’s no faulting that logic,” Belle said with a smile.

Jo rolled her eyes. “Of course you would gather that.”

If Grey suspected anything untoward transpired under his nose, he would march straight to her brother with his suspicions. That would be disastrous.

“How exactly do you plan to keep my brother distracted, Belle?” Jo finally asked when curiosity got the better of her. “It will not be easy to engage his interest or distract him once he’s set on a course of action.”

Her friend’s eyes lit with excitement as she said, “I do not have to distract him because my cousins are en route to visit for an entire month. Your brother will be the recipient of all their attention.”

An involuntary shudder rippled through Jo. She had met Belle’s cousins only once before and only for a moment. They proved exhausting. No doubt shadowed her mind that Poppy, Holly, and

Willow would take London by storm, never mind Brahm. If Belle had enlisted their assistance to keep Brahm occupied, no known force in London would manage to stop them. She almost felt sorry for her brother. Almost.

"That's good, since I've been informed of a potential project, but will receive all the details once more definite information is obtained."

And it could not come soon enough. To sit idly by, attending dull balls, tedious soirees, and dreadful bland tea gatherings drove her to the brink of boredom.

"About that," Evelyn said, her expression suddenly grave. "Matthew has been asking many questions about all of the projects you have participated in."

"What?" Jo and Belle said simultaneously.

"I meant to tell you sooner but it slipped my mind," Evelyn said, her voice apologetic.

"Let him ask," Jo murmured after a moment of internal debate. "You cannot tell him what you do not know. He will tire of it in due time."

Evelyn blushed. "I will admit I rather enjoy his methods of seduction and hope he does not tire of it soon."

"Evelyn!" Jo exclaimed, shocked.

Belle laughed. "Who would have thought you were a wallflower only a few short months ago?"

"Things have changed, yes."

"I am happy for you, Evelyn," Jo said with a soft smile. "However, I do not see how I will be able to seduce a kiss from Craven, what with your husband asking questions and my brother keeping watch."

The disappointment in Jo's chest at the notion of not getting her kiss surprised her.

Belle shook her head in denial. "You do not remember Poppy, Holly, and Willow well. They will keep your brother occupied and I'm certain Evelyn will manage to keep her husband distracted. You remain focused on your smolder."

"Smolder, right. I shall practice it to perfection."

A light clear of a throat drew their gazes to the door, where Jo's footman appeared with a neatly folded note on a silver tray. "My lady, a note has arrived for Lady Grey."

"Oh dear," Evelyn said as she jumped from the divan to retrieve the note from the footman. With one smooth action, she unfolded the note and examined the contents with a smile.

Belle sent a droll stare Evelyn's way. "How rude of Grey to summon you whenever he feels you have been away for too long."

Evelyn's smile widened. "I do not mind."

"Why would you?" Jo muttered. "If I had a husband like that at

home I would never leave.”

“What does it say?” Belle asked before she snatched the note from Evelyn’s fingers.

“Belle! Give that back, it’s private,” Evelyn admonished while Belle sputtered as she read the missive.

“Well, I never! Do you know what he said, Jo?” Belle asked incredulously.

“Obviously not.”

“Get your derriere home now, or I will come fetch you.”

Evelyn snatched the note back. “He believes me up to no good if I am gone too long, especially if I am in the company of my friends.”

Jo gave Evelyn a pointed stare that said: *If you assume you can keep any activities secret from your husband, you are delusional.* When it came to his wife, Grey’s protectiveness was amplified. The end. He did not tolerate her absence for long before he would go in search of her, almost as though the thought of being parted from his wife was unbearable.

A stab of envy pierced Jo. She had once thought to marry and start her own family but had seen too much abuse and horridness to desire such fanciful notions. She would prefer not to subject her heart to that sort of pain—and there would be pain. It always followed, whether from sickness or betrayal, death or lies. *Gah!* Better to pour all her attention into her somewhat dangerous but immensely satisfying projects.

“He cares, and in the grand scheme of things that is all that matters.”

“There is a difference between possession and obsession,” Belle muttered with a dark tone. “Grey borders on obsession.”

“I like his obsession,” Evelyn said, a blush stealing across her face.

“Of course you do. We, on the other hand, are highly skeptical and very suspicious.”

Evelyn chuckled as she gathered her pelisse, clearly intending to obey her husband’s wishes. With a kiss on each of their cheeks, she murmured her goodbyes. The dreamy-eyed expression on her face causing Jo and Belle to glance heavenward.

“I’ll see you, ladies, later!”

As soon as Evelyn cleared the room Belle stood, her hands on her hips, tapping her right foot in agitation.

“Is something amiss?”

“You cannot be considering including Evelyn in any further projects?”

Jo stretched out with languid arms on the chase. “Do you presume I would risk such a thing when Grey’s never far from her side?”

“She’s now aware there may be a project soon,” Belle pointed out.

Jo waved her friend's concern aside. "She is so occupied with her husband and newfound happiness she will not be mindful of us when we proceed without her. Have you noted their distraction?"

Belle nodded. "Of course."

"Have you observed how at every event they disappear for hours on end?"

"Oh, I've noticed," Belle said, her eyes dancing. "They return all doe-eyed and walking on air."

"They are causing quite the scandal," Jo confirmed. "It is my hope all eyes are on them when I'm off winning our wager."

Belle chuckled. "I have no doubt you will try. Be that as it may, it is my hope the entertainment you will provide us may occupy her mind."

"No doubt Craven will reckon me a simpering fool."

Not to mention her brother would skin Craven's hide and display it on their front door as fair warning for any man if he learned of this wager. It would not matter whether Craven had been aware or not. He would be a dead man. Jo may not be simpering, but perhaps she was a fool.

"I daresay he would never consider a lady of your stature to be interested in him. That is why your chances of winning are slim."

Jo snorted. "Yet you gave me lessons." She was stealing a kiss, not the crown jewels. How hard could it be? It would simply be a matter of perfecting her smolder and keeping everyone occupied as to not suspect her intentions.

Craven may not be the man she would have picked if she had any choice in the matter, but he would do. Jo tried not to dwell on the one man she would have picked or at least considered picking had it been up to her.

"Well, we had to give you some lessons or else you would have failed horribly. At least now you have a chance."

"I do not know why I ever agreed to be part of such an outrageous wager," Jo muttered, snatching up a lemon cake.

"The why of it is quite clear. You long for a grand adventure."

"I have plenty of adventure in my life," Jo protested, recalling her projects and how they helped the lives of others. Often they were even a bit dangerous, which added more appeal to them.

"That is different. You long to be swept off your feet."

"This adventure won't sweep me off my feet. It's going to sweep the tattered remains of my reputation to a remote village in the country."

Belle's laughter filled the room, though it sounded more like an evil cackle than an expression of amusement. "They say the country men are more masculine and hard from all the labor. You may just be lucky to be sent off to the countryside."

Jo snorted contemptuously. But perhaps Belle had a point. She would receive the information of their new project in a day or so, so she had until then to win the wager and hope some adventure came of it. At the very least it would prove the distraction she wished to get her mind off her brother's pestering ways and the other pestering males in her life...

Brilliant.

The Devil Meets Lady Veronica Pebblesworth

Excerpt

bit.ly/LadyVeronica

Chapter 1

It was the belief of Lady Veronica Pebblesworth that a great many things could be accomplished if one only put one's mind to it. And if there was one thing Lady Veronica Pebblesworth was known for, it was accomplishing a great many things.

At the age of three, Veronica demanded her father gift her with a violin.

At the age of eight, Veronica had mastered the instrument, as well as the piano.

At the age of ten, she began tutoring the servants, who wholly indulged and doted upon her, on mannerism and speech and stopped only once she'd been satisfied she had accomplished the task to her liking.

By thirteen, she already spoke four languages and, having accomplished much of everything—from the tedious task of embroidery to the much more vigorous art of horse riding—Lady Veronica became, quite understandably so, bored. Thus her attention advanced to more romantic matters.

But that too would soon prove to be naught but foolishness on her part as, at sixteen, Veronica discovered the truth about boys when her heart was stolen and promptly broken by her one true childhood love who she caught kissing Alice Martingale in the stables.

It came as no surprise that by eighteen Veronica had developed into a fine young lady and was, well, a force to be reckoned with, having gained the respect and hearts of all who knew her.

Forgoing the age-old tradition of securing a husband, she instead focused all of her will power on bettering the lives of those in need. Men after all, as Veronica had learned, remained creatures of instinct which existed to appease their most basic of urges, whereas women

possessed the fine quality of intellect. How men managed to fool the entire world into believing them superior remained quite frankly beyond her. And five years of living a gloriously unattached life had only strengthened Veronica's opinion.

It was why when her father calmly notified her that he would betroth her to Daniel Crane in a fortnight if she did not procure the hand of a gentleman of her own choosing, Lady Veronica Pebblesworth only smiled.

Yes, much could be accomplished if one only put one's mind to it and today Lady Veronica gathered all her forces with the sole intention of running off Daniel Crane.

Her nose wrinkled in the corners as she studied the tea-stained list she'd penned for that exact purpose.

How to ensure Daniel Crane scurries for the hills

1. *Encourage him to decline her father's offer.*
2. *Develop an ear cringing giggle.*
3. *Develop bad table manners.*
4. *Work up a fine stink.*
5. *Be exceptionally rude.*
6. *Mention his earnings in conversation.*
7. *Threaten to burn his hotel to the ground.*
8. *If all else fails—hire thugs to kidnap him and hold him hostage until she married another.*

A tremendously long list it was not, but it should be sufficient for her cause. No gentleman worth his salt desired a harpy for a wife.

Clearing her throat, she stepped onto the stool that her footman provided for her and flicked her gaze over her audience before addressing them with a steady voice, "My dear friends, I have called upon you today to discuss a dreadful matter which has befallen me."

An eruption of worried exclamations and concerned eyes darted around to glance at each other before settling back on her.

Veronica's eyes glided over her friends with affection. She had never minded that the girls and boys of her age thought her an oddity. More outspoken and livelier, she'd always known she was different, more accomplished. Her view of the world did not lack the vibrancy absent in most of the children she'd grown up with.

She also did not mind that her dearest friends consisted of their resident cook, stable boy, butler, two maids, one footman and her Irish wolfhound, Fox.

"Oh dear," Cook chimed, fanning her face with a cloth. "Tell me you're not dead, child?"

Veronica's eyes softened. "Dying, Mrs. Dapper, and no, I'm not dying."

"Are you leaving Waverly Manor?" the butler asked, his brows creasing into a frown.

"Not in a manner of speaking," Veronica commented.

"Has your father taken ill?" her maid asked with dismay.

Veronica shook her head. "No Mary, I daresay he will outlive us all," she remarked, her voice laced with sarcasm.

"Then what can it be?" Maddy, the scullery maid, asked.

Veronica straightened and her eyes took on a familiar stubborn glint. "I fear it is a fate much worse than all of that. My father has informed me that I have one fortnight to find a match of my own choosing or I am to be married off to Mr. Daniel Crane, the hotel owner."

Her declaration hovered in the air like a magic trick waiting to be revealed. It was clear from the faces of her friends that they did not wish for this to happen. The cook sputtered, the butler's face turned purple and the scullery maid stomped her foot in indignation. Many hands covered their mouths. All of their expressions seemed to indicate the horror of the fate her father had decided to inflict on her.

Charles, the butler, recovered and looking as imperial as ever, broke the shocked silence, "You are a lady of fine means, surely his lordship cannot mean to marry you to an uncouth businessman?"

"He does not deserve a fine lady such as yourself," Jack, the stable boy, declared with outrage.

Veronica nodded her agreement. "Mr. Crane is rumored to be setting up a hotel in Ireland. I am to be whisked away to another country altogether!"

Her statement caused another uproar of loud exclamations and fiery denials. Their disapproval served to fuel Veronica's determination and sealed the fate of Daniel Crane. He would not gain her hand in marriage.

Her lips widened.

"How absurd!"

"He can't mean to take you away!"

"You belong at Waverly Manor!"

Veronica gave a curt nod—her sentiments exactly. How absurd to expect her to pack up and leave the life she'd built. More absurd even was the prospect of calling Ireland her home, whether only for few years or not. All on the whim of a man. Veronica desired stability and routine; she thrived on it.

"He's a hotel owner."

Veronica waved Cook's comment aside. "His station is of no importance." *At the moment.* "Daniel Crane is reported to be an

obnoxious old goat that has lain with almost every woman in England. As you are all aware, I've no intention of wedding a dolt, certainly not one the likes of him."

Her friends nodded their agreement at her assessment of the infamous Mr. Crane. The furious bobbing of their heads reminded Veronica of wooden dolls attached to cords but she remained ever grateful for their loyal support nonetheless.

"I hardly believe that to be a fair assessment, my lady, since you have never met me," a dark voice interrupted from a now ajar door.

Heads swiveled and Veronica nearly leaped from the stool but managed to remain as composed as a marble statue to his probing eyes. Her heart, however, beat at an alarming pace and she took a moment to catch her breath.

She'd seen a portrait of Daniel Crane but now believed it to have been of his father or perhaps an uncle, not this Greek god who towered before her. Tall, about six foot two in Veronica's estimation, he boasted broad shoulders and a solid chest. His hair, the color of blazing fire, bespoke of a fiery temper and even from across the room Veronica could tell his eyes gleamed a vibrant shade of green. The freckles across the bridge of his nose and upper cheeks softened the hard lines of his jaw and afforded him a younger, boyish look. But for all his striking appearance, Veronica sensed this was not a man to be trifled with. No indeed, he may just be a force to be reckoned with. No matter. Her mind would not change.

Her eyes darted to her father who appeared by his side, regarding her entourage with a narrowed gaze. A fair amount shorter than the mountain hulking beside him, he was not less intimidating.

Veronica's mouth twitched. She happened to be a master at mastering intimidating men.

"It would seem, Waverly, that we found the culprit who appropriated your servants," Crane drawled, his eyes dancing.

At the amusement in his voice, Veronica flushed. "Appropriate is hardly the correct term, not to mention eavesdropping never did look good on a man."

Crane rewarded her with a crooked smile.

"Veronica!" Her father boomed. "Show some manners, girl. Mr. Crane is a guest in our home."

"Ah yes, the infamous hotel owner—Mr. Crane. My apologies sir, it is, of course a pleasure to meet the man my father has commanded I marry if I cannot find a more suitable match in a fortnight."

His smile faltered.

Her father sputtered as his brows drew together.

Veronica did not bat an eye.

"Be that as it may," she continued with a wave toward the wide-

eyed servants, "I am merely informing the household that I may not be here for much longer but that they needn't worry, there will always be a place for them in my home, wherever that may be."

"What are you going on about?" her father asked, somewhat at a loss.

"Why if I marry, as you are forcing me to do."

His eyes narrowed even more. "You are taking my cook with you?"

Veronica tilted her head with a small smile. "I am taking them all."

"You will not!" he exclaimed, and then paused, fighting for composure. With a loud clear of his throat, he said in a more composed voice, "What I mean to say is, that is a matter for your husband to decide."

"It will be the terms of negotiation with my future husband, yes," she raked a superior glance over Mr. Crane, "whoever he may be, or you will just as soon wake one morning to find me married to the butcher."

The low ringing sound of laughter burst from Crane. "You said she was an odd one, Waverly, you never said she possessed a flair for comedy."

Comedy? For the first time in her life, Veronica found herself utterly speechless. How dare he laugh at her!

In a practiced art, she allowed her lips to curl in disapproval and her eyes to glare daggers at the red-headed Adonis. She exuded loathing and distaste, but on the outside remained remarkably calm and impressively unreadable. It was perhaps why, Veronica mused as she saw the laughter reflected in his eyes perish, people thought her cold as ice. She possessed the uncanny ability to appear completely unaffected, even while her insides raged with emotions.

Prepare yourself, Mr. Crane, for you are about to draw your blade on an expert swordswoman.

Crane's eyes narrowed on the little viper's calm air. He would be damned if he let her get to him with her saucy tongue and icy demeanor. Not one ounce of emotion broke through her veneer of stoic expression. But he wasn't fooled. Great passion lay beneath her mask. He sensed it. Felt it even, as if it were radiating from her in waves of suppressed desires.

He'd heard people call her a curious creature, an oddity that preferred the company of servants to that of others. It had also been said that she was a cold fish. Daniel did not care for rumors.

His heart hammered in his chest as he envisioned plucking the pins from her hair. He imagined glorious shades of chestnut tangled in his fingers as she moaned into his mouth.

Bloody hell.

A whisper of a long ago memory echoed off the walls of his mind. A yellow morning dress, white daisies, lyrical laughter that lured him closer. Not a hint of recognition flared in her gaze as she stared at him in dispassion. Not even a morsel of uncertainty. Over the years he had caught glimpses of her in the village where he'd set up his first Inn and from what he could tell, she displayed no regard to the divide between rich and poor. She welcomed the opportunity to assist a person beneath her notice, exhibiting no care for the chasm in stations.

Reports of her beauty did not do her justice either. She was a bit too short, like a child, yet her womanly curves molded into an exquisiteness that removed any doubt of her being a young hatchling. Delicate brows framed intelligent, catlike eyes.

He'd wanted her from the moment he'd spied her in her yellow dress, daisies sticking out from her hair. Yet he was no lord and, at the time, possessed no means to support such a beautiful creature the way she deserved.

So he had worked. And slaved. And worked harder still. Until he'd built an empire so vast and wide no one dared look down on him.

Now, Lady Veronica was finally within his means and grasp. Her lack of suitors presented him with the perfect opportunity to stake his claim and Daniel preferred a woman with spirit. Lady Veronica Pebblesworth bore an abundance of spirit.

Yet she stood before him, almost eye to eye on that stool of hers, looking at him with such disdain and superiority, it set his teeth on edge.

She had no knowledge of who she challenged with her battle ready stance. Had no notion of what he'd endured to possess her. His eyes narrowed on her small, stiff form. Lady Veronica fancied a battle? He'd damn well give her a war.